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NEGOTIATING TENSIONS ACROSS ORGANIZATIONAL BOUNDARIES:  
COMMUNICATION AND REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT ORGANIZATIONS

by

Sarah J. Steimel

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

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In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

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Major: Communication Studies

Under the Supervision of Professor Kathleen Krone

Lincoln, Nebraska

October, 2011

NEGOTIATING TENSIONS ACROSS ORGANIZATIONAL BOUNDARIES:  
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Sarah J. Steimel, Ph. D.

University of Nebraska, 2011

Adviser: Kathleen Krone

Voluntary non-profit organizations play a critical role in mediating the transition of refugees into their new host communities in the United States. Furthermore, mediation is fundamentally a communicative phenomenon, as social services are provided in voluntary mediating organizations through communication between nonprofit workers and clients. Critically, for voluntary mediating organizations to create empowering spaces for refugees in the United States, communication is central. In this study, I emphasize the tensional processes inherent to mediating interactions and critically explore how refugee resettlement organizational staff members and refugee-clients describe the communicative tensions which emerge when they interact with one another. Additionally, I seek to understand how both staff and refugee-clients manage those tensions throughout their interactions.

In researching the communicative tensions present in mediating refugee resettlement organizations, I first uncovered tensions experienced by refugees in their communicative encounters with organizational staff. Second, I explored the tensions that resettlement organizational staff experienced in their communication with the refugee clients they served. Finally, I sought to understand how both refugees and organizational

staff perceived themselves managing these tensions in productive and nonproductive ways.

I conducted eighteen in-depth interviews with fifteen organizational staff members from two nonprofit resettlement organizations about their interactions with refugee-clients and I conducted in-depth interviews with eleven refugees who had participated in both organizations about their experiences communicating with organizational staff. Furthermore, I gathered and analyzed public documents from both resettlement organizations and engaged in participant observation at both organizations. Findings from the present study reveal that tensions surrounding (a) knowledge and expertise, (b) empowerment, bureaucracy and control, (c) rights, power, intervention and liberation, (d) openness, closedness, dialogue and privacy, and (e) integration, separation, uniqueness and uniformity profoundly impact the communicative interactions of organizational staff and refugee-participants in refugee resettlement organizations. The results are discussed in terms of practical implications for mediating organizations as well as theoretical implications for organizational knowledge, voice, empowerment and participation processes.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Though human migration is certainly not a new phenomenon, globalization, as it operates today, has allowed (and perhaps demanded) that an increasing proportion of people live outside their country of birth (Sassen, 2007). While the United Nations estimates that 75.5 million migrants were living outside their country of origin in 1960 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2005), international migration more than doubled to 191 million migrants by 2006 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2006).

The proportion of this migrant population that can rightfully be called *refugees*, however, is a matter of dispute. The United Nations defines refugees as persons who have crossed national borders due to a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” (“Convention relating to the status of refugees,” 1951, Article 1). While 14 million refugees met the formal United Nations’ definition in 2006 (Schweid, 2007), another 20-25 million people are forced to abandon their homes each year because of systematic violence or violations of human rights, but have not crossed a national border (Ngai & Koehn, 2005). The United Nations classifies these migrants as internally displaced persons. Lee (1996) argues, however, that because their experience is consistent with the violence and persecution experienced by refugees, they should be considered refugees. An additional 25 million migrants are environmental refugees, displaced by drought, desertification, or other environmental problems that make their homeland uninhabitable (Myers, 1997). Furthermore, Pipher (2002) argues that millions of additional migrants

cross national borders due to significant insecurity, but are not officially recognized as refugees because the international community does not officially recognize their countries of origin as “in conflict.” As a result, refugees and their official place in society are discursively constructed in the interaction between migrants, government agencies, nonprofit organizations and host communities (Hardy, Phillips, & Clegg, 2001; Leudar, Hayes, Nekvapil, & Baker, 2008; Phillips & Hardy, 1997).

However they are defined, the resettlement of millions of refugees has generated ambivalent effects both on the refugees themselves and on the communities that support them. Positive effects of refugee resettlement include economic development for refugees and for host and native countries, improved security for refugees, and increased cultural diversity and tolerance (Global Commission on International Migration, 2005). Negative effects, however, include conflict between refugees and their host populations, exploitation of refugees, and violations of the human rights of refugees (Castels, 2000).

Because of such negative effects, a number of nonprofit voluntary organizations have developed to help refugees negotiate their resettlement transition (Huntoon, 2001). These organizations are critical to addressing refugee needs and ensuring a mutually beneficial resettlement process for refugees and their communities (Patrick, 2004). However, Ngai and Koehn (2005) argue that displaced persons present “special challenges” for internal and external communication in refugee resettlement organizations because they are characterized by “extreme cultural diversity” (p. 226). This diversity, they argue, gives rise to communicative tensions that simultaneously allow for and inhibit the organization’s mission to facilitate the refugee resettlement

experience. Despite the significant role these organizations play in mediating refugee resettlement, research has yet to explore the specific ways that communication tensions emerge and are responded to in this critical organizational context. Consequently, understanding the ways in which communicative tensions emerge in the interactions between staff and clients in refugee resettlement organizations has the potential to inform organizational communication at both the theoretical and practical levels. In this chapter, I outline a rationale for pursuing an exploration of the communicative tensions present in the interactions between refugees and for organizational workers in refugee resettlement organizations.

### **Refugee Resettlement as an Area of Inquiry**

#### **Refugee Resettlement Context**

Though refugees often resettle in their own nations, or in nations adjacent to their country of origin, formal refugee resettlement programs approved by the United Nations are carried out by 10 countries - Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States (Mitrofanova, 2004). Of these countries, the United States accepts more than double the number of “official” refugees (under the United Nations definition) than are accepted by the other nine countries combined (Singer & Wilson, 2007). As a result, more than 2.6 million “official” refugees have resettled in the United States since 1970 (Austein, 2007). Additionally, the United States admitted an average of 90,000 people per year for the last two decades leading up to September 11, 2001 (Amnesty International USA, 2008). Though refugee resettlement in the United States fell significantly in the years

immediately following 2001, President George W. Bush announced to Congress in 2007 that he had increased the federal budget for refugee resettlement to allow for up to 70,000 refugees to settle in America during 2008 (The Office of the President, 2007). Given that President Obama has similarly pledged to increase refugee resettlement, particularly of Iraqi refugees (Obama, 2009), the number of refugees experiencing life in the US resettlement context will continue to increase for the foreseeable future.

This particular study was carried out in the state of Nebraska. Nebraska is the fifth largest refugee resettlement location per capita in the United States (Mitrofanova, 2004). This relatively high concentration of refugees, moreover, is particularly notable given that otherwise, Nebraska is a relatively non-diverse state. The U. S. Census Bureau (2010) estimates that 91. 4% of the Nebraska population is White and that only 4. 4% of the Nebraska population is foreign born. Additionally, the medium-sized Nebraska city selected for this study receives approximately half of the refugees that resettle in the state. The refugees that resettle in this city come from 40 different countries and include, in part, Afghani, Vietnamese, Bosnian, Russian, Ukrainian, Kurdish, and Sudanese refugees (Mitrofanova, 2004). Thus, the selected city has a significant and diverse refugee population, making it an appropriate location for study.

### **Challenges Faced by Resettled Refugees**

Wherever they resettle, refugees and the communities that serve them face a wide range of challenges. Admittedly, refugees are not a homogeneous population. Coming from different countries and cultures, they have had a wide range of experiences that may affect their migration experience (Burnett & Peel, 2001). Despite this diversity, there are



some common themes typically reported by refugees about their resettlement experiences. Refugees are more likely than voluntary immigrants to arrive desperately in need of medical care (see Burnett & Peel, 2001; Gavagan & Brodyaga, 1998; Pollick, Rice, & Echenberg, 1987) and mental health care (see Eisenbruch, 1988; Pipher, 2002). Most refugee families have lost family members through war, persecution or illness (e.g. epidemics, starvation), and most refugee women have experienced rape or sexual assault (Friedman, 1992). Once settled, refugees are also more likely than voluntary immigrants to face a difficult set of economic circumstances (Bollinger & Hagstrom, 2004) and struggle to find and adjust to new types of employment (Stein, 1979). Finally, resettled refugees are regularly isolated by cultural and language differences with their host populations (Davidson, et al., 2004). Because of the problems refugees face, organizations routinely develop to help meet the needs of refugees (Huntoon, 2001). Next, this introduction will provide a brief overview of the current work on refugees and their experiences in the organizational context.

### **Refugees and the Organizational Context**

Because voluntary nonprofit and social service organizations frequently develop to assist in the refugee resettlement process, scholars from a variety of disciplines have sought to understand the experiences of refugees and the organizations that serve them. The most well studied area of organizations serving refugees is the healthcare context. A vast literature exists in the health and medical fields detailing the challenges facing health organizations and healthcare professionals whose purpose it is to provide medical (e.g. K. M. Adams, Gardiner, & Assefi, 2004; Downing, 1989) and mental health services (see

Beiser, 1991; Silove, Steel, & Watters, 2000) to refugee communities. Many of the studies focus on practical issues of identifying and treating refugee illnesses (e.g. Gellert, 1996; Palinkas, et al., 2003) or mental health struggles (see K. Harris & Maxwell, 2000; Williams, 1989) from the perspectives of health care professionals (e.g. doctors, nurses, lab technicians, etc.). Few, if any, focus on the experiences and/or understandings of the refugee participants themselves in these medical contexts.

An important subset of these studies on the resettled refugee healthcare experience examines the healthcare challenges created by cultural and language differences inherent in the communication between medical professionals and refugees. For example, Bischoff, et al. (2003) found that language barriers between nurses and refugee patients during the nurses' medical screening interview negatively affected the reporting of refugees' health problems and their referral to further health care. Similarly, Jones and Gill (1998) found that language barriers between refugees and medical care providers at the reception desk and in the consultation room are common and suggest that healthcare facilitators must be hired by medical clinics to speak the refugees' language(s) and serve as both linguistic and cultural liaisons between refugees and healthcare workers. While this area of scholarship details clearly the problems posed by communication in the medical field, little research offers solutions for managing these problems. One exception is Conquergood's (1988) innovative ethnographic study, in which he describes his work in a Hmong refugee camp where doctors were frustrated by their inability to spread public health messages effectively. Conquergood explains how he used Hmong street-theater practices to create performances like the "Rabies Parade" that

helped bridge the language gap (p. 183). Despite Conquergood's study, few studies offer solutions for managing language and cultural differences in healthcare organizations serving resettled refugees.

The literature on the role of non-healthcare organizations in the refugee resettlement processes is less developed. The majority of non-healthcare refugee organizational studies address the role of nonprofit organizations in providing employment counseling and training (see Hohm, Sargent, & Moser, 1999; Kramer, Smith Nightingale, Trutko, Spaulding, & Barnow, 2002) and helping refugees access social welfare services like food, clothing, or housing assistance (e.g. Lawrence & Hardy, 1999). Few of these studies focus specifically on the role of communication in these interactions. Overall, these studies of nonprofit organizations in refugee resettlement contexts (including both healthcare and non-healthcare organizations) are primarily instrumental in focus – they focus on how to provide the most effective job training or medical care to refugees. Furthermore, while the articles often present how-to guides for serving refugees, they largely ignore how communication functions (or dis-functions) in this particularly critical organizational context. Thus, in this study I sought to explore how the staff of voluntary organizations and the refugee-clients of those nonprofit organizations experience communication in the refugee resettlement organizations critical to successful cultural negotiation and transition.

### **Taking a Communication-Centered Perspective on Refugee Resettlement Organizing**

#### **Theoretical Implications/Rationale**

Issues of refugee resettlement have been studied by sociologists, anthropologists and members of the medical community. The resulting research illuminates issues such as the difficulty of providing adequate medical and mental health-care to resettled refugees, the challenges refugees face in attaining work and the ways in which communities may be affected by and affect the refugee resettlement process. However, relatively little attention has been given to issues of refugee resettlement by communication scholars generally or organizational scholars in particular (for exceptions, see Chapter 2). This is an important gap in organizational communication research. Given the rapidly growing presence of refugees and migrants worldwide, the potential harms experienced by both these refugees and by surrounding communities if refugee resettlement is managed poorly, and the critical position of refugee resettlement organizations in mediating the resettlement process, organizational communication scholarship has much to offer. For instance, while literature in the medical field often lists “communication” as one of the barriers to providing adequate healthcare to resettled refugees, communication is often treated as a black box. In other words, problems are attributed to communication with little sense as to how each party experienced the communicative encounter. As a result, little is known about the actual communication processes experienced in the day to day encounters between refugees and staff in refugee resettlement organizations.

Furthermore, voluntary non-profit organizations play a critical role in mediating the transition of refugees into their new host communities (Huntoon, 2001). Specifically, mediating organizations are those organizations “standing between the individual in his

private life and the large institutions of public life” (P. L. Berger & Neuhaus, 1977, p. 2).

The vast majority of the available literature on mediating organizations, however, can be found in the field of sociology rather than communication. Nevertheless, mediation is fundamentally a communicative phenomenon, as social services are provided in voluntary mediating organizations through communication between nonprofit workers and clients. More critically, for voluntary mediating organizations to create empowering spaces, communication is central.

Unfortunately, when communication is mentioned in discussions of mediating organizations generally or of refugee resettlement organizations in particular, it is often treated as a tool to be used by refugee resettlement organizational staff to gain compliance from refugee clients. For instance, doctors and nurses often report that communication barriers between medical staff and refugee clients prevent refugees from adequately following medical directions and from receiving optimal care (see Bischoff, et al., 2003; D. Jones & Gill, 1998). However, this treatment of communication presumes that refugee-clients are both passive and delinquent in their communication and fails to examine the ways in which both refugees and organizational staff experience and respond to communicative tensions in more complex ways. As Stohl (1995a) argues, contemporary organizational events are inextricably linked to communication constructs. Thus, to understand the practical dilemmas of life in American organizations, we must examine the *central role* of communication.

By treating organizational communication as complex and central, I emphasize the processes inherent to the interaction between organizational staff and refugee-clients

in order to understand how those interactions mediate the refugee resettlement experience. In such a social constructionist view, the interaction between staff and clients through communication creates the reality(ies) that both parties experience. The resulting view of organizations further challenges the “container” metaphor for organizations, in which organizations are seen as concrete entities with discrete boundaries. Rather, this study adopts an organizational metaphor of “voice,” which examines organizing as the interaction of voices and seeks to understand issues including access to voice and communication expression and suppression (Putnam & Boys, 2006; Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1996). Under the voice metaphor, communication tensions emerge through a “chorus of singing and stilled voices” (Putnam, et al., 1996, p. 379).

In taking a communication-as-voice perspective on refugee resettlement organizations, attention is directed at how the voices of refugees and organizational employees interact in everyday encounters. A lens of communication-as-voice prevents a static approach to viewing organizations and organizational practices – instead, we can explore how the resettlement experience is produced and reproduced through interaction. Specifically, I am interested in the tensions both refugee-clients and refugee resettlement organizational staff members experience in their communicative interactions with one another and the communication strategies they use to manage those tensions.

A central assumption I am making in this inquiry is that organizations are inherently tension-filled environments and that organizational tensions like paradoxes, contradictions and ironies are not problems to be resolved but are rather normal parts of the organizational experience (see Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004). Such tensions,

therefore, may be engaged through communication in both more productive and less productive ways (e.g. Putnam, 1986; Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Thus, empirical work has been increasingly concerned with the ways in which actual organizational members experience the variety of communicative organizational tensions that have been theorized to be part of their lives (see Hatch, 1997; Stohl, 1995b). However, studies that address organizational tensions through an applied lens, explicitly weighing enabling and constraining ways that members may respond to binds, are still relatively rare (Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004). Thus, in this study I seek to fill this gap by starting from a voice metaphor of organizational communication and by critically exploring how refugee resettlement organization staff members and refugee-clients describe the communicative tensions which emerge when they interact with one another. Furthermore, I explore how both employees and refugee-clients engage with those tensions.

### **Practical Implications/Rationale**

In addition to the theoretical implications for the discipline of organizational communication, this area of inquiry also has practical implications for the millions of refugees who resettle in the United States each year. First, this study has practical implications for understanding what communicative tensions characterize the refugee resettlement experience from both the perspective of the refugees engaged in resettling and from the perspectives of the organizational staff members attempting to mediate that resettlement. Both organizations working in resettlement and the governmental agencies that rely on them would benefit from a deeper understanding of how communicative tensions are experienced in the interaction between workers and clients in these

organizations. Particularly, this study seeks to include the perspectives (voices) of resettled refugees, whose personal experiences are rarely represented in the current literature. A more complicated and complete understanding of the tensions inherent in the communicative interactions which characterize resettlement organizations is an important starting place for improving the resettlement experience.

Second, this study sought to understand how both refugee-clients and organizational staff members engage in organizational communication tensions in both productive and nonproductive ways. Thus, this research uncovers strategies which both refugee-clients and organizational staff might use to manage the tensions they experience in positive ways.

### **Outline of the Study**

In the first chapter, I identified the purpose of this study and justified the theoretical and practical significance. Second, Chapter 2 involves a review of the relevant literature on mediating organizations, communication in voluntary organizations, communication as inherently tension-filled and communicating with and through difference. Chapter 3 details my methodological approach to this study. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 provide in-depth analyses of each of my three research questions. Finally, in Chapter 7, I engage in a discussion of these results and suggest implications for the understanding of communication across boundaries of mediation organizations as tension-filled as well as practical implications for refugee resettlement.



## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

In order to critically explore how employees of nonprofit voluntary organizations that facilitate refugee resettlement and the refugee-clients of those nonprofit organizations experience communicative tensions in their interactions with one another, in this chapter I begin with a discussion of mediating organizations in general and voluntary organizations in particular. Next, I review research on communication in voluntary organizations. Third, I explore how communication functions in tension-filled ways in organizations generally and voluntary organizations in particular. Fourth, I examine research on one primary tension in refugee resettlement organizations – communicating with and through difference.

### **Mediating Organizations**

Because voluntary non-profit organizations play a critical role in mediating the transition of refugees into their new host communities (Huntoon, 2001), an exploration of the communication processes in refugee resettlement organizations requires an understanding of how they operate as mediating organizations in the United States.

In the 1830's, Alexis de Tocqueville commented on the unique American proclivity to form associations to deal with public problems. Tocqueville mused that given the problem of public drunkenness, Americans are more likely to form an association to deal with the matter than are the English, for example, who are more likely to look to their nobles for a solution (Couto & Gutherie, 1999). In this way, Tocqueville and others have theorized that the democratic society in general, and the form of democracy operating in the United States in particular, functions as “an association of

associations” (J. L. Adams, 1980, p. 3). According to Adams (1980), this web of associations includes a multitude of groupings: commercial, industrial, educational, artistic, professional, recreational and philanthropic. In order to fully understand organizing in a democratic society, therefore, it is critical to interrogate the functioning of various associations in that society.

Of particular interest in a democratic society are those organizations that function as intermediaries between the democratic populace and their nation-state (J. L. Adams, 1980). Berger and Neuhaus (1996) explain that as modern society has become increasingly complex, governments and governmental services have become larger, more bureaucratic, and less accessible to everyday citizens. As Berger and Neuhaus explain, the basic configuration of modern society often pits “vast, anonymous, and potentially oppressive megastructures against the vulnerable personal words of individuals” (p. 145). In order to ensure that individuals are able to both provide for their needs and to communicate upwards towards governing structures, Berger and Neuhaus posit that individuals rely on intermediary organizations. Honig (2004) explains that intermediary organizations generally are organizations that occupy the space in between at least two other parties. Honig furthers that intermediary organizations “operate independently of these two parties and provide distinct value beyond what the parties alone would be able to develop or to amass by themselves” (p. 67).

Specifically, Berger and Neuhaus (1977) introduced the term mediating structures to refer to those intermediary organizations “standing between the individual in his private life and the large institutions of public life” (p. 2). Such mediating structures are

critical to the effective functioning of a democratic society in part because “intermediary groups link citizens to government” (B. D. Jones, 1981, p. 668). As Jones (1981) explains, as government becomes more and more bureaucratic, intermediary organizations increasingly must deal with complex organizational structures to obtain benefits desired by individuals. Furthermore, mediating structures function to prevent individuals from being isolated from society (Berger & Neuhaus, 1977). Mediating structures connect people to institutions and ensure public structures have personal meaning. As a result, Berger and Neuhaus (1996) argue that such mediating organizations have a both a private face, giving private life a measure of stability, and a public face, transferring meaning and value to social megastructures. Thus, Berger and Neuhaus argue that mediating structures “alleviate each facet of the double crisis of modern society” (p. 159).

Berger and Neuhaus approach the study of mediating organizations from a particular ideological standpoint. Berger, a sociologist, and Neuhaus, a former Lutheran minister turned Catholic Priest, have been labeled political neoconservatives and, in general, support a limited governmental role in public life ("Father Richard Neuhaus: Catholic conservative commentator," 2009). In fact, in their first edition of *To Empower People*, Berger and Neuhaus (1977) argued for the necessity of mediating structures to protect individuals from the tyranny of an all-encompassing government. Thus, Berger and Neuhaus (1977, 1996) advocate mediating organizations as a preferable way to achieve small-government. This study does not adopt this ideological position. This study does not argue that mediating organizations are preferable to governments (or the

reverse). Rather, this study starts with the factual observation that mediating organizations play a significant role in refugee resettlement and thus argues that mediating organizations are significant site for scholarly inquiry.

Berger and Neuhaus (1996) argue that for mediation to function in a meaningful way, it cannot be sporadic and occasional; rather mediating must be institutionalized in structures and organizations. In their original work, Berger and Neuhaus (1977) delineate four mediating structures which serve as intermediaries in modern social life: the neighborhood, the family, the church, and voluntary associations. Certainly, however, these four types of mediating structures are not the only proposed mediating organizations. As Berger (1977) argues, the concept of mediating structures may be one of the central themes of the modern sociological tradition. For instance, Adams (1980) proposed that mediating structures might include not only private organizations (those existing outside of the government in a literal sense), but might also include governmental organizations formed to help mediate the public's interactions with governmental megastructures. Furthermore, Fort (1996) argued that since much of a person's conscious life will be involved with work, workplaces might be profitably understood as mediating structures as well. However, because all refugees who enter the United States legally are placed into one of ten Federally-approved voluntary agency programs to assist with their initial resettlement and are encouraged to seek out "nonprofit organizations that provide refugees with critical resources to assist them in becoming integrated members of American society," (Office of Refugee Resettlement,

2009) for the purposes of this study I am primarily concerned with the subset of mediating organizations comprised by voluntary organizations.

As Lewis (2005) explains, voluntary organizations operate under (and are studied under) many names, including “the civil society sector...the independent sector, the nonprofit sector, the third sector, and the nongovernmental sector” (p. 239). As the potential distinctions between those terms do not affect this study, I will primarily use the term voluntary organizations to refer to these voluntary associations, but at times will use the other terms listed above if that is how they are presented in a particular piece of literature.

A voluntary organization, then, is “a body of people who have voluntarily organized themselves in pursuit of particular goals” (Berger & Neuhaus, 1996, p. 194). Following Berger and Neuhaus’ definition, I exclude business corporations, governmental structures, and other primarily economic institutions. Furthermore, voluntary associations, which one may choose to join or not to join, must be kept distinct from involuntary ones, in which such a choice does not exist (Adams, 1980). Voluntary organizations may be comprised of either paid or volunteer staffing, or both. As Berger and Neuhaus explain, “For our purposes, the crucial point is the free association of people for some collective purpose, the fact that they may pay some individuals for doing work to this end not being decisive” (p. 194). Ultimately, therefore, voluntary organizations are the subset of organizations voluntarily organized by individuals to serve some collective social purpose.

### **Functions of Voluntary Mediating Organizations in a Democratic Society**

Generally, mediating organizations facilitate exchange relationships on a continuous basis between numerous actors (Sasson, 2008). They have as a primary function, the linking of clients or customers who are or wish to be interdependent (Thompson, 1967). They have been found to occupy an important role in the economy as well as in social life (Davis & Mizruchi, 1999; North, 1991). Having introduced the general concept of mediating organizations, it is important to next discuss the particular functions of volunteer organizations in a democratic society.

Caragata (1999) argues that voluntary associations function as mediating structures in two ways. First, voluntary associations may operate as mediating structures by seeking to directly influence the state or marketplace, for example by providing access to governmental programs or by providing social services directly. This occurs when civil society actors mediate an agreement with another social institution (the state, marketplace, or the family).

For instance, Berger and Neuhaus (1996) argue that voluntary associations often function as alternative mechanisms to provide welfare-state services. Voluntary organizations might do so in two ways. Initially, volunteer organizations might function to help individuals apply for social services provided by the state (e.g. apply for welfare benefits or unemployment benefits). In this way, volunteer organizations serve to directly mediate the individual's experience with the state. Additionally, volunteer organizations "have played a critical role in helping people in need by providing education, training, residences, counseling, and in-kind and cash support" (Lipsky & Smith, 1989, p. 625). Thus, rather than matching individuals to government services, volunteer organizations

might provide social services themselves (e.g. by collecting donations of money, food or clothing from the state or private donors and then distributing those to individuals in need). In this way, volunteer organizations mediate both the state and the marketplace for private citizens.

The second way that voluntary associations can function as mediating structures occurs when people within voluntary organizations define a collective need, ideology or position and use the voluntary organization to advocate that position back to the state and/or marketplace (e.g. by opposing a redevelopment project or by advocating for particular school reforms). As voluntary groups organize, “they experience defining a need, collectivizing it with attendant modifications and compromise, and through a collective process the need is met or problem resolved” (Caragata, 1999, p. 280). As Kerrine and Neuhaus (1979) explain, from the point of view of the individual, voluntary associations offer the opportunity for close, face-to-face contact with people with whom one shares a sense of belonging on some issue. This sense of belonging allows voluntary organizations to both shape and support personal values, which in turn also allows voluntary organizations to function as platforms from which to shape communal values. Caulfield (1994) argues that these processes of support and advocacy allow voluntary organizations to create alternative spaces which support alternative and critical social practices.

Furthermore, these processes of defining a collective need and advocating that need to the state and/or marketplace validate and reinforce human competence and

capacity and reinforce people as actors who have agency. Berger and Neuhaus refer to this as empowerment, which they describe as the cure to:

a feeling of powerlessness in the face of institutions controlled by those whom we don't know, and whose values we often don't share . . . The mediating structures such as exist in civil society are the principal expressions of the real values and real needs of people. (1996, p. 164)

Voluntary organizations create space for empowerment by allowing individuals who would be voiceless alone against powerful institutions to join together to create a stronger social voice. Price (1980) concurs that voluntary mediating organizations offer a paradigm to empower poor people and “to do so where in it matters, in people’s control over their own lives” (p. 381). As a result, voluntary organizations play an important role in both initiating social change and distributing public power (Sills, 1967).

Voluntary organizations, however, do not simply mediate upwards (towards the state/marketplace), they also mediate downwards (towards their organizational members) (Berger & Neuhaus, 1996). In addition to communicating the social positions and ideologies of their members upwards toward governing structures, voluntary organizations serve an important function by integrating and socializing subgroups into the culture and institutions of the majority (Sills, 1967). According to Smith (1983), voluntary associations integrate individuals and groups into society in many ways, including countering social dislocations and fostering cooperation. According to Smith, voluntary organizations thus serve conflicting functions in society: both changing and defending the status quo. To do so, mediating communication in voluntary organizations



occurs primarily across organizational boundaries – as organizational volunteers and staff and the clients served by the organization communicate with one another to negotiate both their own and shared social values.

As a result, voluntary associations serve dual mediating functions. They not only mediate the private experience of the public sphere by providing accessible public goods (e.g. welfare, unemployment, food, clothing, shelter), they also mediate the integration of private values and traditions into the public experience by providing agency and empowerment for voluntary organizational staff and participants to communicatively interact. From the perspective of society, voluntary mediating organizations provide a moral foundation in their ability to generate and sustain values where the megastructures offer mainly impersonal processes. Thus, voluntary mediating organizations “contribute to the well-being of the individual and the moral integrity of the larger society” (Kerrine & Neuhaus, 1979, p. 11).

### **Refugee Resettlement Organizations as Mediating Organizations**

Because states and international governing bodies that assist and resettle refugees do so by funneling funds through voluntary organizations (Crisp, 2001; Loescher, 2001; Zetter, 1999), voluntary agencies serve an essential mediating function for refugees entering the United States. Voluntary non-profit organizations mediate refugee resettlement in the United States in two ways. First, voluntary agencies may operate as mediating structures for resettled refugee populations by seeking to directly provide for members’ needs. In fact, historically, social services have been provided to refugees primarily through nonprofit agencies, particularly voluntary religious organizations

(Ryan, 1992). A number of studies have documented how nonprofit organizations are critical to providing for the medical, mental health, employment and other needs of refugees who have resettled in the United States (e.g. Crampton, Dowell, & Woodward, 2001; Miller, 1999; Nawyn, 2006).

Second, voluntary agencies operate as mediating structures for resettled refugee populations by providing space for refugees to organize to meet their needs outside of the state and the marketplace. For instance, Wahlbeck (1998) found that refugee-created voluntary organizations provide an important avenue of political participation for refugee groups, and that such organizations are often more effective at providing for refugee needs than official governmental organizations. Similarly, Mestheneos and Ioannidi (2002) found that voluntary community organizations in which refugees participate provide empowerment for refugees who are able to collectively address their own specific religious or cultural needs.

Thus, voluntary refugee resettlement organizations function as mediating organizations both by providing needed social services to refugees and by creating space to both mediate the refugee experience of American culture and to empower the integration of refugee values and traditions into the public American experience. In these voluntary mediating organizations, communication across organizational boundaries (between staff and refugee-clients) fundamentally serves as a site in which the refugee experience is discursively constructed in the United States.

Yet, despite the reality that voluntary organizations play a key role in mediating the refugee experience in the United States, organizational communication scholarship

has yet to investigate the ways in which communication functions across the organizational boundaries of refugee resettlement organizations. In fact, the vast majority of the available literature on mediating organizations generally can be found in the field of sociology rather than communication. However, mediation is fundamentally a communicative phenomenon, as social services are provided in voluntary mediating organizations through communication between nonprofit workers (organizational insiders) and clients largely external to the organization itself. More critically, for voluntary mediating organizations to serve their collective-organization function (and create empowering spaces for participants to learn cultural values and communicate their values out toward the state/marketplace), communication across these boundaries is central. Thus, the next section of this literature review examines the ways in which communication has been studied in and across voluntary mediating organizations.

### **Communication and Voluntary Mediating Organizations**

Although voluntary and nonprofit organizations share many individual characteristics with other organizations, the various collections of characteristics that are observable in many voluntary organizations create a profile that is quite different from most for-profit organizations. As O'Neill and Young (1988) argue, legal constraints, revenue sources, types of personnel, and the nature of governance in voluntary organizations make them unique from for-profit organizations. Implications of those differences show up in management and employee values, incentives, and constraints, “thus creating differences in how the basic functions of management are carried out” (Fottler, 1981, p. 4). Since organizations are fundamentally constituted through

communication (Putnam, Nicotera, & McPhee, 2009), the unique organizational structures and constraints found in voluntary organizations are produced and reproduced through communication.

Krohling Peruzzo (2009) explains that communication in third sector (voluntary) organizations focuses primarily on social action and human development on behalf of the community and “provides an alternative to traditional professional practice” (p. 664). However, Lewis (2005) argues that voluntary organizations, which comprise what she calls the civil society sector, “have gone largely unstudied in terms of important managerial and communicative issues” (p. 240). Lewis furthers that organizational communication scholars have not paid significant theoretical attention to nonprofit organizations. While many studies of organizational communication dynamics have taken place within voluntary and nonprofit organizations (NPOs), “these studies have most often left unexamined and untested theories relating to the specific unique features of NPOs” (Lewis, 2005, p. 241).

In order to fully understand the role non-profit organizations play in mediating the transition of refugees into their new host communities, I will overview both the existing literature on communication in voluntary organizations and communication across voluntary organizational boundaries.

### **Communication in Voluntary Organizations**

Initially, the majority of existing communication scholarship which examines voluntary organizations has focused on communication processes within voluntary organizations focusing, for example, on volunteers and stakeholders, communication

through technology, and communication's role in creating alternative organizational structures.

First, a few organizational communication studies have sought to understand the unique communication practices involved in recruiting, retaining and motivating nonpaid (volunteer) employees. For instance, Adams, Schlueter and Barge (1988) examined three prevalent forms of conventional wisdom by comparing volunteers and paid employees in the following areas: (1) intrinsic motivation, (2) perceptions of supervisors' decision-making style, and (3) perceived compliance-gaining communication of supervisors. Subjects from eight different organizations provided information regarding these areas via questionnaires distributed through their respective organizations. Results revealed that volunteers were higher in intrinsic motivation than paid employees. Supervisors of volunteers used more participative decision-making than supervisors of paid employees. Further, volunteers were more satisfied with their supervisors' decision-making than were paid employees. This study, therefore, highlighted a few ways in which volunteer communication differs from paid-employee communication.

Adams and Sheperd (1996) had volunteer hospital workers evaluate the effectiveness of regulative messages constructed by hospital staff in response to four different scenarios. They found that volunteers were most open to regulative (behavior correcting messages) when they perceived that the expectations for volunteer behavior were clearly communicated by the organization and when supervisors offered positive face support in conjunction with their regulative messages. Adams and Sheperd, therefore, highlight how supervisors might communicate to guide volunteer behavior.

Finally, Ashcraft and Kedrowicz (2002) argued that in organizational communication studies, empowerment has come to connote flatter structures, participation programs, and other techniques thought to enhance member competence and control through increased self-direction. However, they contend that this model presumes a particular (paid) employment contract. Their study, therefore, sought to explore empowerment in staff-volunteer relations at a nonprofit organization. They found that, while volunteers prioritized the role of social support in accomplishing empowerment, staff members treated volunteers as pseudo-employees to be empowered through enhanced authority and participation. Ironically, the staff's communication model impeded volunteer empowerment. Thus, Ashcraft and Kedrowicz highlight ways in which staff member communication may impede volunteer empowerment and limit the retention of volunteers in voluntary organizations.

Second, organizational communication scholars have sought to understand the unique communication processes involved in communicating with voluntary organization stakeholders. The most prolific research has examined effective strategies for recruiting donors and generating donations for the voluntary organizations (see Meisenbach, 2005; Meisenbach & Jones, 2003; O'Neil, 2008; O'Neil, Schrodtt, & Grau, 2008; Waters, 2009a, 2009b).

Lewis, Hamel and Richardson (2001) present a more complex stakeholder picture through their examination of organizational stakeholder communication during times of planned voluntary organizational change. As they explain, implementers of change initiatives must negotiate demands for their time and attention as well as attend to severe

resource constraints. Through interviews with nonprofit administrators, Lewis, Hamel and Richardson developed six models of implementation communication adopted by nonprofit implementers in interacting with various stakeholder groups. The data were also used as a basis for theorizing about two communicative dimensions of the task situation—communication efficiency and consensus building—which may be used to predict implementers' choices of approach to their communication with stakeholders.

Lewis, Richardson and Hamel (2003) then continued to study the methods through which organizational members communicate to stakeholders during times of change. By investigating the stakeholder communication of 66 nonprofit organizations undergoing change, implementers' self-reports of frequency, timing, approaches, and topics of communication with 10 stakeholder groups were examined. Results indicate that implementers generally follow a quid pro quo "matching rule" wherein stakeholders' resource importance serves as the basis on which they are awarded communicative attention. Thus, communication with relevant stakeholders has been developed as a unique attribute of voluntary organization communication.

Third, organizational communication scholars are beginning to explore the unique ways in which technology use may shape and be shaped by communication practices in voluntary organizations. While public relations and media scholars have published extensively on the role of websites and other internet technologies in recruiting donors and furthering voluntary organizations' missions and goals (e.g. Hye Mm, Youjin, & Kiouisis, 2005; Kenix, 2008; Kensicki, 2003; Nah, 2010; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009), organizational scholars have only more recently adopted this line of

research (see, for example, Ganesh's 2003 study of technology adoption in Indian nongovernmental organizations)

Finally, organizational communication scholars have begun to explore the ways in which communication may operate in nonprofit organizations to produce and reproduce alternative (non-hierarchical) organizational structures (see Ashcraft's 2006 exploration of feminist post-bureaucratic organizing and Zoller's 2000 exploration of dialogic organizing in World Health Organization community health initiatives).

Though these four areas of communication scholarship are important, they are largely bounded by the boundaries of the organization in which they occur. However, as voluntary organizations seek to mediate the experiences of the clients they serve in our larger civil society, the communicative relationships between those internal to the organization and those external to it are an essential area of study.

### **Communication Across Voluntary Organizational Boundaries**

Though rarely explored in the communication literature, one additional communicative relationship that must be studied in voluntary organizations is boundary-spanning communication inherent in the relationship between the staff (paid or nonpaid) of voluntary organizations and the clients they hope to serve. In organizational research broadly, the communicative relationship between organizational staff and clients is most typically theorized in the context of for-profit organizations, specifically in terms of creating customer loyalty.

For instance, Gremler and Gwinner (2000) define service rapport as a customer's perception of having an enjoyable interaction with a service provider employee,



characterized by a personal connection between the two interactants. The enjoyable interaction component of this relationship relates to having a positive experience during a transaction or when a customer has an affective interpersonal experience with the employee. A personal connection relates to having a strong bond with the other person based on some type of tie (e.g. sharing similar interests, having comparable backgrounds, mutual caring, etc.). If both of these components are established during a service encounter, positive rapport is established. Barksdale, Johnson and Suh (1997) similarly find that, in a healthcare context, a patient's commitment to his/her physician is determined, in part, based on the affective commitment between the patient and physician as perceived by the patient. This reaffirms the role of positive rapport in generating customer loyalty. Gremler and Gwinner (2000) found that positive rapport positively relates to increased customer satisfaction, loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth. Similarly, Liu, Leach and Bernhardt (2005) find that customers' increased perception of the value of a service provider increases repurchase intent, wherein the greater the satisfaction in the relationship, the greater the likelihood of repurchased intention.

Given the role of customer-service rapport in generating repurchase behaviors, organizational scholars have begun to explore the communicative components of rapport from a service perspective. Gremler, Gwinner and Brown (2001), for instance, find that the key to building a strong employee-customer relationship is through the establishment of trust, confidence, reliability and integrity in communicative encounters. Further, Stern, Thompson and Arnould's (1998) narrative analysis of customer relationships with marketing sales professionals identifies that customers typically desire to develop a

partnership with employees during service transactions, specifically reporting that they wish to be understood, cared about, and have their values taken into consideration.

Ultimately, therefore, Gremler and Gwinner (2008) conclude that retail managers should be particularly interested in building communication rapport because of the potentially significant and positive impacts it can have on the firm as a whole.

However, the relationship between clients and nonprofit employees is likely to be significantly different in this particular subset of nonprofit organizations. In nonprofit service providing organizations, clients who may be in desperate need of food, clothing, shelter or other material assistance may not have the luxury of simply relocating to another organization if they do not develop a positive rapport with nonprofit employees. In fact, clients in for-profit organizations have consistently been found to exhibit decreased loyalty and intention-to-stay if the perceived quality of alternatives is high (Li & Petrick, 2008; Yim, Chan, & Hung, 2007). Though this relationship has not been studied fully in the nonprofit context, the limited ability of nonprofit clients to seek help elsewhere may lead scholars to conclude that nonprofit service seekers may have high loyalty and compliance to their organizations if they have few alternatives.

As a result, in organizational communication approaches to nonprofit organizations, both organizational staff and organizational scholars often render voluntary organization clients as passive, positioning them “as potential recipients of predefined services rather than as agents involved in interpreting their needs and shaping their life conditions” (Fraser, 1989, p. 174). In this sense, communication within organizations is emphasized, and clients are simply seen as recipients of internally-

produced missions-statements, policies and/or goals. While nonprofit clients faced with few alternatives may not leave their organization, Trethewey (1997) explains that feminist theory would argue that the marginalized and normalized client is rarely completely passive and submissive. Rather, marginal voices, like those of the client, often actively shape communication across voluntary organizational boundaries by challenging dominant organizational discourses in a plurality of ways.

Specifically, Trethewey (1997) found that voluntary organizational clients used six communication strategies to resist problematic policies at one particular voluntary organization, including (a) parodying and refusing confessional practices, (b) fighting bureaucracies and bureaucrats, (c) playing games, (d) breaking rules, (e) bitching and (f) revisioning relationships (p. 288). Throughout her study, Trethewey found that clients often accommodated relationships with the social worker and reproduced the dominant discourse that positions clients as dependent and deficient. Yet, many clients simultaneously reinvented those dependent relationships to enable them to “fight for their rights as clients in other agencies and to secure their own needs at WSSO [the voluntary organization being studied]” (Trethewey, 1997, p. 296). Specifically, two forms of client resistance, parodying and refusing confessional practices and revisioning relationships, transformed organizational practices. Whether and to what extent refugees are able to engage in such resistance practices in light of the power disparities inherent in refugee resettlement organizations is an important area for this analysis.

Similarly, Papa, Singhal and Papa (2005) sought to understand the complex nature of communication between organizational staff and clients in voluntary

organizations seeking to foster social change. As they explain, when a group of disempowered people organize for social change, those in organizational power may ironically sustain their privileges by reinforcing control or further denying rights to the poor. Thus, an organization seeking to offer empowerment in one sphere may unwittingly lead to oppression in another sphere. Thus, Papa, Singhal and Papa argue that dialectic tensions between (1) control and emancipation, (2) oppression and empowerment, (3) dissemination and dialogue, and (4) fragmentation and unity structure the boundary-crossing organizational communication experiences of staff and clients in social change organizations (see also M. J. Papa, Auwal, & Singhal, 1995, 1997; M. J. Papa, Singhal, Ghanekar, & Papa, 2000a).

Finally, Steimel (2010) interviewed six Sudanese refugees about their experiences communicating with staff in voluntary mediating organizations. Four dialectical tensions emerged from participants' stories about their communication in and with staff in voluntary mediating organizations: (a) dissemination and dialogue, (b) emancipation and control, (c) empowerment and oppression, and (d) integration and separation. These four dialectical tensions both facilitated and simultaneously complicated the communicative relationship between refugees and organizational workers, volunteers and participants. Throughout the interviews, the refugee participants continually emphasized their reliance on mediating organizations to facilitate their resettlement process and their frustration when organizational communication complicated that process.

Thus, as Lewis (2005) argues, organizational communication scholars must explore the ways in which communication dynamics uniquely shape and are shaped by voluntary organizations. Specifically, in the context of refugee resettlement, the unique organizational boundary-spanning relationships between staff in refugee resettlement organizations and the refugee clients which they serve is an important area of study. Given the previous research on staff-client communication in general and staff-refugee communication in particular in mediating organizations (see Papa, Singhal & Papa, 2005; Steimel 2010; Trethewey, 1997), it appears that this particular communication is characterized by a variety of tensions and contradictions. When viewed through a more critical lens, a more complicated and complete understanding of the tensions inherent in the communicative interactions which characterize resettlement organizations will emerge.

### **Voluntary Organizational Communication as Tension-Filled**

As globalization has pushed organizational environments to become more complex and turbulent (Volberda, 1996), and as diverse institutional forms have merged and emerged, organizations and their members are pulled or are purposefully pushing in different, often competing directions (Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004). As a result, organizational communication scholars are increasingly concerned with the various tensions, contradictions, and double binds that appear to be endemic to organizational life (Ashcraft & Trethewey, 2004). Specifically, as previous research into the relationship between organizational staff and clients in voluntary organizations reveals, the communicative relationships between staff and clients are often characterized by a wide

variety of tensions. Thus, an exploration of the communication between staff and refugees in refugee resettlement organizations must consider the ways in which communication tensions mediate the resettlement experience.

Historically, many organizational communication scholars have taken an instrumental orientation that depicts organizational tensions such as paradox, irony, and contradiction as “ruptures” or flaws in the “social fabric” of organizations (Putnam, 1986, p. 153). These theoretical positions reflect pervasive assumptions of much existing organizational theory: that organizations and their members are rational entities and actors, that goals are unidirectional and consistent, and that *good* communication is ordered and clear (see Ashcraft & Trethewey, 2004; Burgelman, 1994; Eisenberg, 1984; Mumby & Putnam, 1992).

However, Trethewey and Ashcraft (2004) challenge this assumption of organizational rationality and argue that paradox, contradiction and irony – in sum, organizational tensions – are normal conditions of organizational life, not anomalous problems to be removed or resolved. I embrace this perspective, as elaborated on by Harter and Krone (2001), that communicative tensions and paradoxes are properties of life itself. While terms like paradox commonly connote something negative or inconsistent, they powerfully capture the inherent tension between seemingly opposing forces. As Stohl and Cheney (2001) argue, paradoxes are neither good nor bad across the board. People experiencing situations characterized by paradox or contradiction can experience uncertainty (C. R. Berger & Calabrese, 1975), anxiety (Leathers, 1979) and feelings of paralysis (Putnam, 1986). However, as Handy (1995) has explained, out of

the crucible of contradiction can emerge creativity, innovation, and excitement. Further, Hatch (1997) contends that paradoxes allow organizations to maintain mutually exclusive structures, such as stability/instability, without incapacitating the organization. Putnam (1986) adds that “contradictions and conflicts, as ruptures in the current social fabric, function as opportunities to change prevailing practices” (p. 153). Organizational members may strategically use communication to foster organizing tensions in order to resist organizational power structures (Mumby, 2005; Mumby & Stohl, 1991) or to craft alternative organizational forms (Ashcraft, 2000, 2006). Thus, communication holds the power to operate in tensional ways, and, as a result, moral and practical assessments of communication tensions must be attuned to specific situations (Stohl & Cheney, 2001).

Consequently, I do not see organizational tensions as de facto evidence of failure or inadequacy. Rather, consistent with Trethewey and Ashcraft’s (2004) call, I assume that “foregrounding tension can lead to richer understandings of actual practice and thereby aid in theory building” (p. 82). By exploring the extent to which particular communicative tensions emerge in refugee resettlement organization, I both build on tension-centered organizational communication theory and highlight practical ways refugees and organizational staff may engage with those tensions in productive and nonproductive ways. Tension-centered scholarship thus takes as its starting point the organizational tensions that present members with practical dilemmas of organizing in the real world.

### **Voluntary Organizational Communication Tensions**

The literature surrounding the management of communicative tensions in organizational environments explores five interrelated (and not entirely separable) terms through which communicative tensions can be defined: tension, contradiction, paradox, double bind and irony.

Terms such as tension, organizational tension or communicative tension are the terms with the broadest scope. Stohl and Cheney (2001) explain that ‘tension’ is used simply to refer to a clash of ideas or principles or actions and to the discomfort that may arise as a result. For example, “How can I be a good worker and a good father at the same time?” is a tension that might be present in an organizational context (p. 354).

Second, contradiction refers more specifically to situations in which one idea, principle, or action is in direct opposition to another (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). For example, organizational members often report that they desire predictability in organizations while at the same time reporting that they are energized by spontaneity and novelty (Weick & Westley, 1996). From this “interplay of certainty with uncertainty, order with disorder, predictability with novelty, organizations sustain a dynamic ongoingness” (Harter & Krone, 2001, p. 256). Contradictions are thus key phenomena for understanding organizational experiences (Stohl & Cheney, 2001).

Dialectical tensions are one particular type of contradiction that are frequently explored in the organizational communication literature (see, for instance, Harter & Krone, 2001; Mumby, 2005; Mumby & Stohl, 1991; M. J. Papa, et al., 1995, 1997; W. H. Papa, Papa, Kandath, Worrell, & Muthuswamy, 2005). According to Baxter (1988), dialectical theory focuses on the simultaneous existence of two apparently contradictory



forces in a communication experience (e.g. certainty and uncertainty, openness and closedness), and examines the tensions and contradictions that are created by the coexistence of such seemingly opposing forces. By applying a “both/and” perspective to communicative experiences, dialectic theory helps us to understand the complexity of experiences and relationships (see Bakhtin, 1935/2004; Baxter, 1988; Semlak, Pearson, Amundson, & Kudak, 2008).

Though the concept of dialectics has been defined in various ways, four elements are central to most of the conceptualizations: (a) contradiction, (b) motion, (c) totality, and (d) praxis (Papa, Singhal, & Papa, 2006, p. 43). First, *contradiction* refers to the coexistence of oppositional forces in a communicative relationship. For instance, openness and closedness are opposing forces, but both may exist in a communicative relationship. Second, *motion* presumes that people are not fixed on a continuum (e.g. between openness and closedness) but instead shift between the poles through communication over time. Third, *totality* refers to the “constant interconnection and reciprocal influence of multiple individual, interpersonal, and social factors” (Rawlins, 1992, p. 7). This means that multiple dialectics may be operating at once, influencing one another. Finally, *praxis* assumes that each communicator is influenced by and influences the communicative environment. Taken together, contradiction, motion, totality and praxis provide a dialectical perspective for understanding the ways in which seemingly contradictory messages may co-exist, generating contradictions that persist in communicative relationships.

Third, the term paradox comes from the Greek words “*para + dokein*” meaning “to think twice; to reconcile two apparently conflicting views” (Putnam, 1986, p. 153). Specifically, a paradox is most often represented by a set of statements that are self-referential, contradictory, and trigger a vicious (or sometimes, virtuous) cycle. A paradox results when, in the pursuit of a specific goal (or goals), one calls for or carries out actions that are in opposition to the very goal(s) one is trying to accomplish (Stohl & Cheney, 2001).

Paradox in this sense is slightly different from a true logical paradox as defined by mathematical proof. Paradoxes in an organizational sense are pragmatic or interaction-based situations in which, in the pursuit of one goal, the pursuit of another competing goal enters the situation (often without intention) so as to undermine the first pursuit. Furthermore, pragmatic paradoxes are time- and context- dependent in that they must be understood in terms of practical interaction. For example, democratic organizations sometimes institutionalize their norms in a way that ends up making the organizations undemocratic (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Putnam (1986) argues that such system-wide paradoxes accrue from the complexities of organizing and are inevitable.

Stohl and Cheney (2001) identify four categories of pragmatic paradoxes of participation which shape and are shaped by organizational communication: (a) Paradoxes of Structure; (b) Paradoxes of Agency; (c) Paradoxes of Identity and (d) Paradoxes of Power. First, paradoxes of *structure* concern the architecture of participation and democracy in an organization. Generally, structures are the rules and procedures established by organizations to guide interactions. Paradoxes result, however,

when the very formality of structures limits what they are intended to achieve. For instance, rules and agendas designed to encourage meaningful discussion in team meetings may paradoxically limit open participation as individuals are required to follow the rules. Second, paradoxes of *agency* relate to an individual's (sense of) efficacy within the organizational system. For example, a manager may encourage an employee to "do things our way but in a way that it still distinctively your own" (p. 360). Paradoxes of agency, therefore, often involve paradoxes between a need for individuality and a need for collective unity. Third, paradoxes of *identity* deal with the inevitable difficulty of establishing selfhood and individuality while remaining part of a group. The paradoxes of identity address issues of boundaries, space, and the divide between in-group cliques and out-groups comprised of all "others." Paradoxes of identity suggest that individual needs and self-management are often powerfully managed by the group and by adherence to organizational goals. Finally, paradoxes of *power* contain the locus, nature, and specific exercise of power in the organization. For example, an employer may imply to an employee that he/she should "Be independent, just as I have commanded you!" (p. 360). As a result, paradoxes of power center on issues of access to resources, opportunities for voice, and the shaping of attitudes and behaviors. Organizational communication scholars have explored the role of paradoxes as they shape and are shaped by organizational communication in a variety of ways (e.g. Allard-Poesi, 2005; Ashcraft, 2006; Forbes, 2009; Stohl, 1995b; Wendt, 1998; Wood & Conrad, 1983; Yeung, 2004).

Fourth, the term double bind typically pertains to a situation in which a primary and a secondary injunction conflict directly with one another ("Do this!" "Don't do

this!”) and where a tertiary injunction is present (either explicitly or implicitly) which prevents the person(s) from exiting the situation (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Some research has exposed the ways in which female managers and leaders (e.g. Jamieson, 1995; Sullivan & Turner, 1996; Wood & Conrad, 1983) and non-dominant group members (Buzzanell, 1999) can become trapped in double binds in organizational contexts.

Finally, irony, a literary and rhetorical trope, refers to a stance toward organizational contradictions that invites observers and participants to realize and perhaps also to transcend the limitations of the contradiction (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). As a stylistic device, irony “asserts that things are not only what they seem but something else besides... it expresses an attitude of...simultaneous seriousness and play” (Pearce, 1989, p. 202). For instance, if a person tells his/her friend who has just tripped over a cord “*smooth move*” in an ironic sense, the phrase simultaneously communicates “that was *not* a smooth move.”

Irony, however, is not simply a literary trope or form of speech (Trethewey, 1999), rather, irony is also a “temperament, a sensibility, a stance toward the status of meaning” (Ferguson, 1993, p. 32). As Trethewey (1999) argues, irony, in this multi-layered sense of the term, helps individuals to live with, explore and potentially exploit the contradictions of organizational life. For example, Hatch (1997) explored the ways in which managers used irony, contradiction and humor in their discourse with one another to discursively construct and organize their cognitive and emotional experiences in and of their organizations. Similarly, Real and Putnam (2005) explored the ways in which a

splinter group of a U. S. airline pilots' union used ironic strategies to resist a contract settlement supported by union leaders.

Each of these five types of tensions (tension, contradiction, paradox, double bind and irony) overlaps and interacts to shape organizational communication. Thus far, organizational communication research into communicative tensions has primarily focused on the way(s) in which tensions are experienced within organizations (e.g. between organizational workers or between workers and management). However, as Trethewey (1997), Papa, Singhal and Papa (2005) and Steimel (2010) indicate, communicative tensions including paradox, contradiction, irony and others are inherent to the staff/client communication across organizational boundaries of voluntary mediating organizations as well. Thus, this study hopes to extend our tensional approach to organizational communication by further exploring the ways in which communicative tensions operate across organizational boundaries.

### **Communicative Responses to Organizational Tensions**

Thus far, this communication literature has generated useful conceptual models and typologies, delineating some common types of organizational tension at both the micro- and macro- levels of organizing (e.g. Putnam, 1986; Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Yet, relatively little empirical work explores how actual organizational members experience the variety of communicative organizational tensions and respond to tensions, contradictions, and paradoxes, solidifying and transforming organizational realities in the process (Ashcraft, 2001).

Limited previous research has outlined a few ways in which members respond to organizational tensions. Putnam (1986) explains that individual responses to inconsistent or paradoxical messages typically take one of three main forms: (a) accepting one of the messages or contradictory sides of a message while ignoring the inconsistency or paradox; (b) accepting both messages (or sides of a contradiction) and operating within the contradiction; and (c) merging the contradiction into a creative alternative action.

Stohl and Cheney (2001) elaborate and expand on Putnam's (1986) typology by highlighting five possible responses. First, the individual, group, or organization may simply come around to thinking that the organizational paradox or tension is "so fundamental and the values so important, that departure from the organization or dissolution of the organization is the only realistic option" (Stohl & Cheney, 2001, p. 393; see also Wood & Conrad, 1983). Second, individuals may use strategies of voice or resistance that are not destructive, but that participate in organizational mechanisms to voice opposition to the practices or policies of an organization (Putnam, 1986; Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Third, individuals may capitulate to the organizational tensions by reaffirming loyalty, rededication, and adaptation to the organization with paradoxes intact (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Fourth, individuals may select a strategy of determined ignorance by "muddling through" or coping with organizational tensions by not participating (Stohl & Cheney, 2001, p. 395; see also Putnam, 1986; Wendt, 1998). Finally, individuals may pursue a strategy of synthesis, reframing or living with the paradox (Martin, 2004; Putnam, 1986; Stohl & Cheney, 2001), described as transcendence or "building new identifications by uniting elements of the old with

previously unrecognized associations for a concept” (Wood & Conrad, 1983, p. 316).

Martin (2004) elaborates on this strategy list by exploring the particular ways in which women in middle management use conversational humor to negotiate their managerial identities and to live within the gender and power paradoxes of organizational life.

Furthermore, Harter (2004) explores the particular ways in which farmers in agricultural cooperatives respond to the paradoxes of agency and manage the tensions inherent in cooperative organizing.

However, these studies are relatively rare exceptions of empirical scholarship which seeks to understand how organizational tensions are experienced by and responded to by a particular organizational population. Furthermore, given the unique staff/client relationship inherent in voluntary mediating organizations, the power imbalances present between staff and clients may influence the response strategies selected as both staff and clients experience these boundary-spanning communicative tensions.

Thus, in this study I seek to fill this gap by critically exploring how nonprofit employees and refugee-clients of nonprofit refugee resettlement organizations describe the communication tensions they experience in their encounters with one another. Furthermore, I explore how both employees and refugee-clients engage with those tensions. Thus, this study seeks to make a theoretical contribution to the communication as tensional literature as it seeks to extend what we know about communicative tensions across organizational boundaries.

Second, Ngai and Koehn (2005) argue that displaced persons present “special challenges” for the internal and external communication of refugee resettlement

organizations because they are characterized by “extreme cultural diversity” (p. 226). This diversity, they argue, gives rise to communicative tensions that simultaneously allow for and inhibit the organization’s mission to facilitate the refugee resettlement experience. Thus, by adopting the tensional approach to analyzing refugee resettlement organizational communication as it exists across organizational boundaries, I seek to make a practical contribution to refugee resettlement organizations by exploring the ways in which employees and refugee-clients can creatively engage with those tensions.

### **Communication With and Through Difference**

Ngai and Koehn (2005) argue that the unique challenges that refugees present for communication in refugee resettlement organizations are a function of the stark cultural diversity typically present between refugees and voluntary organization staff. This diversity, they argue, gives rise to communicative tensions that simultaneously allow for and inhibit the organization’s mission to effectively facilitate refugee resettlement. Thus, at a practical level, the effective resettlement of millions of refugees each year depends on the ability of social service workers and refugees to meaningfully communicate with and through their differences. As a result, this section will explore one particular type of communicative tension in depth – communicating with and through difference, between organizational insiders and outsiders, in refugee resettlement organizations. As *organizing* with and through difference is fundamentally an issue of *communicating* with and through difference (Allen, 2004), communication researchers have begun to explore organizational difference. First, I will highlight the contributions and limitations of the traditional approach to communicating with difference in and across organizational



boundaries, and then I will highlight the emerging approach to organizational communication and difference.

### **Traditional Approach to Organizational Communication and Difference**

Traditionally, the largest number of studies seeking to understand the dynamics and tensions present in communication with and through difference emerge from a descriptive intercultural approach to organizational communication (Hewstone, Martin, Hammer-Hewstone, Crisp, & Voci, 2001). Two lines of intercultural communication studies are frequently cited in the literature on difference in organizations.

First, intercultural communication studies have largely focused on documenting differences across national cultures and the ways in which those cultural differences might shape communication (Fine, 1996; J. N. Martin & Nakayama, 2003). Perhaps most famously, Hofstede (1984; 1991; 2001) collected 116,000 questionnaires from the employees at the subsidiaries of the multinational organization giant IBM between 1967 and 1973. Based on his analysis of the workers' responses, Hofstede (1984; 1991) indicated that the national cultures that he had examined could be positioned on four independent dimensions: (a) power distance, (b) uncertainty avoidance, (c) individualism/collectivism, and (d) femininity/masculinity. A fifth dimension, long-term/short-term orientation was later added (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Hofstede (2001) defined power distance as the extent to which people accept or expect power equality or equality in distribution. Uncertainty avoidance involved the extent to which people enjoy uncertainty or the extent to which people desire certainty, structures, and rigidity. The individualism/collectivism dimension measured the extent to which people value

individualistic achievements and self-expressions or the extent to which people value collectivistic achievements or group harmony. Femininity/masculinity explored the extent to which people emphasize feminine values and gender neutral roles and the extent to which people emphasize masculine values and gender role differentiation. Finally, long-term/short-term orientation encompassed the extent to which people value the past and seek long-term planning or outcomes and the extent to which people emphasize short or medium-term planning or outcomes. Hofstede argues that communication between workers in an organizational context will be fundamentally shaped by the location of each worker's national culture on the five dimensions.

A number of studies have continued this intellectual tradition by documenting and describing differences in national cultures as they shape communication in organizations. For instance, Haruta and Hallahan (2003) applied Hofstede's five dimensions of culture to contrast organizational responses to airline crisis communication in the United States and Japan. Siira, Rogan and Hall (2004) performed a comparison between American and Finnish cultures to determine the ways in which conflict management and face maintenance might differ for workers from these respective nations. Similarly, Sunaoshi (2005) examined the influences of historical position (including nationality) and cultural context in the communication between American and Japanese factory workers. In this first type of studies, intercultural communication scholars seek to document national cultural differences which influence communication between individuals of different national backgrounds.

Second, intercultural communication scholars have engaged in more focused studies of particular organizational behaviors as they are manifest in various national cultures. For example, Page and Wiseman (1993) compared supervisor behavior and worker satisfaction in the United States, Mexico and Spain. Nishishiba and Ritchie (2000) examined the different ways in which business people in the United States and Japan described the construct of trustworthiness. O’Kane and Hargie (2004) described differences in attitudes towards communication technologies between the United Kingdom and Norway. Finally, Botero and Van Dyne (2009) explored how interactions between Leader-Member Exchange theory and Power Distance serve as predictors of employee voice in the United States and Colombia. In this second type of intercultural communication studies, intercultural scholars seek to understand the ways in which particular organizational attitudes or behaviors are manifest differently in different national cultures.

Both types of intercultural communication studies, however, have been critiqued as being overly-focused on the differences of individuals across national cultures and for presuming a uniformity of national cultures (McSweeney, 2002). Essentially, differences between individuals are presumed due to national cultural differences rather than as a result of the natural variation of individuals even within a national culture. This creates a problematic perspective on communicating with difference, because as Kim (2007) explains, “When a whole culture or society is pigeonholed in dichotomous categories such as masculine/feminine, individualistic/collective, high-power/low-power distance, active/passive or loose/tight, subtle differences and qualitative nuances that may be more

characteristic of these social entities are glossed over” (p. 28). This line of research has been called the global-culture approach to difference. As Cai and Donohue (1997) explain, the global culture approach to difference portrays culture (national, racial, gender, etc.) as having a global influence on people’s communicative behavior. This global-culture approach assumes that individual businesspersons conform fully to the culture and practices of their own group (see, e.g., Triandis, 1976, p. 335). In this view, an American businessperson behaves and communicates like a “typical American” and a Japanese businessperson behaves and communicates like a “typical Japanese person.” This approach provides an understanding of broad differences in communication among cultures (see Ting-Toomey, 1985), but it does not explain variations within a culture or variations among cultures that share a broad value. Moreover, it is unable to account for the communication of a manager from one culture who has been extensively exposed to or adapted to another cultural system of communication (Wilson, Cai, Campbell, Donohue, & Drake, 1995).

Additionally, dichotomous binaries, like those proposed by Hofstede and adopted by much of the intercultural literature, have been criticized as perpetuating a colonial discourse leading to sharp binary oppositions between a ‘developed and modern’ side (mostly ‘Anglo-Germanic’ countries) and a ‘traditional and backward’ side (the rest) (Carbaugh, 2007; Kim, 2007). Kim (2007) argues that such a binary discourse makes communication with differences difficult without placing differences on a hierarchy or in opposition.

Third, the intercultural communication literature on communicating with differences in organizational contexts has been criticized as being overly-concerned with individual-level assimilation or acculturation into a dominant culture (Fine, 1996). Just as the management literature often presumes differences as something to be managed through erasure, intercultural studies often suggest strategies for those in the non-dominant culture to learn to communicate like those in the dominant culture, failing to take into account the more complicated ways that difference might function in organizations (e.g. organizations may benefit if difference is intentionally not assimilated).

Finally, while intercultural approaches to organizational communication have begun to take seriously the possibilities of communicating with difference in organizations, few if any studies have been concerned with difference as it exists across organizational boundaries. In a more general sense, some organizational researchers have sought to understand interpersonal communication across organizational boundaries. For example, Bolkan and Daly (2009) examine the ways in which employee responses to customer complaints affect the customer's attitudes towards (and thus the bottom-lines of) for-profit organizations. Similarly, Zabava Ford and Snyder (2000) explored the ways in which factors including wait-time affected service communication behaviors in dental offices. In the specific context of voluntary mediating organizations, as detailed previously, Trethewey (1997) has begun to explore how communication emerges in interaction between clients and staff and how clients can resist staff member communication in creative ways. These studies acknowledge that the customer or client

and employee relationships to be unique and worthy of separate communication study. Unfortunately, these studies of communication across organizational boundaries also fail to account for the ways in which differences between clients and staff provide both challenges and opportunities in interaction. In the case of refugee resettlement organizations, however, cultural, national, religious and other differences are frequently common between workers in the resettlement organizations and the refugees whom they seek to serve, complicating their interactions (see Ngai & Koehn, 2005). As a result, this study seeks to both complicate and expand the intercultural approach to organizational communication by focusing on these complex interactions across organizational boundaries.

### **An Emerging Approach to Organizational Communication and Difference**

Recently, however, scholars have begun to push for a fifth “moment” in the field of intercultural communication (Starosta & Chen, 2001). The “fifth moment” refers to the historical moment which began in the 1980s when scholars adopted a critical approach to intercultural communication and began to engage issues of power, context, and ideology in their studies. For instance, Zaidman (2001) calls for organizational communication scholars to adopt a “culture-in-context” approach to understanding the tensions created by communicating with and through difference in organizational contexts (p. 410). According to Zaidman, the culture-in-context approach focuses on interactions with difference among individual organizational members. In this category, Zaidman includes work that has shown that businesspeople do not fully conform to one cultural code and that they adapt to specific situations (e.g. Adler & Graham, 1989; Cai

& Donohue, 1997; Francis, 1991). Scholars define this perspective as the culture-in-context approach because the scholarship explicitly acknowledges that communication behavior is affected by local and contextual factors, including power, personal relationships, personality, and identity (see Cai & Donohue, 1997; Janosik, 1987) in addition to larger cultural categories. Similarly, Martin and Nakayama (1999; 2003) have invoked dialectics as a conceptualizing framework for understanding research on and processes of intercultural communication. Other scholars have extended their work through analyzing the dialogic complexity of specific intercultural interactions (Allen, Orbe, & Olivas, 1999). In this way, culture is positioned as a concept that can be used to help in the discovery of the range of variation, rather than act as an imposition of particular sense-making constructs upon varied experiences and meanings (Cooks, 2001). Such conceptualizations are increasingly called upon as a response to the bipolarizing tendencies of our much of the intercultural communication research highlighted above.

Studies which adopt the fifth “moment” or critical approach to intercultural communication include studies of the communicative construction of cultural identity (see, for example, Carbaugh, 1988, 1998), studies of whiteness and white privilege (Endres & Gould, 2009; Levine-Rasky, 2002; J. N. Martin & Davis, 2001; J. N. Martin & Nakayama, 1998) and studies which more generally take history, power and context into account when exploring intercultural interactions (see review in Halualani, Mendoza, & Drzewiecka, 2009; Steyn, 2004)

Though these studies are undeniably important in advancing the intercultural communication field generally, organizational communication scholars are also calling for more nuanced studies of communication and difference (see Allen, 1995, 2000, 2004; Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007; Grimes & Parker, 2009; Munshi, 2005). However, studies of the role of difference in the interaction between mediating organizational workers and the clients they serve have thus far been nonexistent. This study, therefore, seeks to extend both our theoretical knowledge of the tensions of communicating with difference in a mediating organizational context and our practical knowledge for improving the communicative interactions between refugees and refugee resettlement organizational staff members specifically.

Finally, discussions of organizational diversity/difference in both the intercultural and interpersonal communication literature are still fundamentally shaped by managerial and colonialist interests (Cheney, 2000b; Munshi, 2005). When difference is conceptualized, immigrants, women, and/or people of color are almost always listed as the principle dimensions of the diversity phenomenon (Munshi, 2005; Prasad, Mills, Elmes, & Prasad, 1997). Difference research in organizational communication rarely theorizes whiteness, citizenship status or socioeconomic privilege as elements of difference/diversity. Essentially, only those outside the dominant groups are “different.” This othering of non-dominant group members as different reifies power and hierarchy in organizational contexts, limiting the ability of organizational communication scholars to theorize organizational difference in more just and equitable ways (Cheney, 2000b).



Such affirmations of power in difference are particularly problematic in voluntary organizations as the hierarchical nature of the nonprofit organizational context may provide unique challenges for equitable communication with and through difference. Papa, Singhal and Papa (2005) argue that organizing in nonprofit contexts to achieve social change is inherently a tension-filled process. One of the dialectical tensions they identify is the tension between oppression and empowerment. Essentially, Papa, Singhal and Papa argue that actions taken by nonprofit organizations which in one context are designed to offer empowerment to a group of people may simultaneously be oppressing in another way. One of the ways this happens is through “us” and “them” thinking. When social change organizations are founded, they are typically organized with the purpose of empowering some particular social group, whether it is a minority group, women or the poor. The social danger lies, however, when nonprofit workers (especially those who are dominant group members) groups begin to rhetorically ‘other’ the group they are helping as “in some way lesser than we are” (Papa, Singhal, & Papa, p. 245).

As Cooks (2001) asserts, the majority of intercultural interactions are highly asymmetrical, yet conventional research approaches tend to serve the interests of the dominant group and are unable to lend insight into the asymmetry characteristic of the majority of intercultural interactions (Cooks, 2001). Traditional intercultural, interpersonal and organizational communication research on organizing with difference tends to focus on diverse individuals with relatively equal power in organizations (i.e. on diverse but relatively equal members of a workgroup), essentially assuming power equality without interrogating it. Nonprofit voluntary organizations are unique, however,

in that they may be more likely to experience difference in a power-laden way.

Particularly in the refugee resettlement context, nonprofit organization members are often members of the dominant culture(s) in the United States (e.g. white, American citizen or permanent resident, socio-economically stable, etc.). Organizational clients, however, come primarily from non-dominant (subaltern) groups (e.g. non-white, refugee/non-citizen, socio-economically unstable, etc.). Thus, voluntary mediating organizations provide a rich opportunity to study communication with difference across organizational boundaries in situations of unequal hierarchical power.

### **Research Questions**

This analysis of the available literature have led me to pose the following three research questions about the presence and functions of communicative tensions in mediating refugee resettlement organizations:

RQ1: What tensions do refugee-clients in mediating refugee resettlement organizations

experience in their communicative interactions with nonprofit employees?

RQ2: What tensions do workers and volunteers in mediating refugee resettlement

organizations experience in their communicative interactions with refugee-

participants?

RQ3: How do both organizational staff and refugee-clients communicatively respond to

these tensions in refugee resettlement organizing?

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODS**

### **Methodology**

Designing a study requires more than simply selecting research techniques; questions of the underlying assumptions of the research design must be addressed. To this end, I first discuss the assumptions of qualitative/interpretive research as it is broadly understood. Second, I examine the general assumptions of the critical research paradigm. Third, I present a combined interpretive-critical paradigm as it applies to organizational communication. I then proceed to explain the specific procedures utilized in this study.

### **Assumptions of Qualitative, Interpretive Research**

Initially, there are four assumptions of interpretive scholarship that guide the conditions under which interpretive research can be productively done. First, interpretive scholars make the ontological assumption that the nature of reality is socially constructed. Unlike postpositive scholars who assume an objective, knowable reality, interpretive scholars assume that reality(ies) are multiple and subjective from the perspective of individual participants (Creswell, 2007). This occurs because interpretive scholars view humans as active social actors who construct and interpret the world around them (Cheney, 2000a). Thus, interpretive research privileges deep understandings of participant meanings of and experiences with their own lived realities (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Second, interpretive scholars assume that the role of the knower is subjective and engaged. As Cheney (2000a) argues, interpretive scholars believe that facts cannot simply present themselves. As active social actors, scholars similarly must construct and

interpret the world around them, and as they do so, they are inevitably influenced by their own values, beliefs, and social experiences. As a result, unlike postpositive scholars' presumed objectivity, interpretive scholars are encouraged to actively acknowledge their own positionality and values and to be actively aware of how those positions might influence their work (Rubin & Rubin, 2004). Furthermore, because interpretive scholars are not seen as objective experts, interpretive scholarship advocates reducing the power distance between researchers and participants in order to allow participant meanings to be expressed most clearly (Creswell, 2007).

Third, as Cheney (2000) explains, interpretive scholars believe that real life and scholarship cannot be held as distinct. This is true because interpretive researchers believe that all meaning and interaction are contextually situated (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). As a result, interpretive research eschews artificial research settings (e.g. labs, experimental designs) and instead embraces naturalistic (e.g. in-field) research approaches (Baxter & Babbie, 2004).

Finally, the process of interpretive scholarship is open and emergent (Deetz, 2001). While postpositive research seeks to hypothesis test a priori theoretical constructions in order to create generalizable laws, interpretive research is inductive, emergent, and "a little unruly" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 66). As a result, interpretive scholars often embrace data collection tactics (e.g. semi-structured interviews, see Rubin & Rubin, 2004) and data analysis tactics (e.g. in vivo coding, grounded theory, see Corbin & Strauss, 2008) which allow participant meanings to guide the research.

As a result of these four assumptions, interpretive research offers three primary strengths as a form of inquiry. First, interpretive research is unique in that it allows the experiences and voices of individuals to be heard (Deetz, 2001). Interpretive research allows the individual voices to be featured from their own perspectives/experiences. Second, interpretive research's emergent nature offers an additional benefit (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Interpretive research functions as a powerful tool to broach new scholarly ground and define emergent concepts. Third, interpretive research gains strength from its role as contextually situated (Merrigan & Huston, 2004). Given the complexities of the social world, studying leadership, participation, difference or any other communication construct requires an understanding of where and how that construct is used. Interpretive research favors such deep understandings of phenomena in context.

In this study, I am influenced by the interpretive approach because I am interested in the ways in which both refugee resettlement organizational staff and their refugee-clients experience communication as tensional in their interactions with each other in mediating organizations. Because I am interested in these experiences from their perspectives, and because very little research has been done to understand communication and interaction in either refugee resettlement organizations in particular or in voluntary mediating organizations in general, an interpretive, emergent method is appropriate.

### **Assumptions of Critical Research**

Critical scholars adopt the interpretive scholars' view of individuals as complex and contradictory constructors of social reality, but go further to argue that those

individuals both shape and are shaped by larger social, economic, political and cultural discourses (Deetz, 2001). Thus, Alvesson and Deetz (2007) argue that the goal of the critical scholar is threefold. First, critical scholars seek insight – describing how a problem or context is experienced by individuals or organizations. Second, the scholar critiques, or exposes how those experiences are shaped by social, economic, political and cultural discourses, material conditions, and structures of power. As Mumby (2000) explains, critical scholars are concerned not only with surface observations, but with interrogating the values and interests that underlie knowledge claims. Finally, the critical scholar offers transformative redefinition of issues, seeking to pose more socially just or empowering alternatives for social relationships (Alvesson & Deetz, 2007). Taken together, these goals of critical research formulate a central concern of:

Understanding, explicating and critiquing the various ways in which political and ideological limits are placed on social actors' abilities to fully realize their identities as active participants in meaningful dialogue communities (including organizations). (Mumby, 2000, p. 72)

Given these goals, a critical approach to this study is also appropriate because I am interested not only in staff and refugee-client descriptions of their communication experiences, but I am also interested the economic, political and social forces which shape those experiences and in understanding how both refugees and staff might engage those communicative tensions in more and less productive ways. As such, I seek to pose empowering alternatives for social relationships within the context of interaction across the boundaries of mediating organizations.

### **The Interpretive-Critical Approach to Organizational Communication**

Putnam (1983) argues that interpretive and critical research methods are not mutually exclusive in organizational communication research. Rather, Putnam argues that critical interpretivists “delve beyond the meaning created from social actions to the deeper interpretations hidden below the surface” (p. 51). This critically-based position within the more general interpretive paradigm “offers the greatest value to organizational communication researchers” (Deetz, 1982, p. 132).

According to Deetz (1982), a combined interpretive-critical organizational communication scholarship pursues three goals: first, interpretive-critical scholarship seeks to uncover the structures of meaning in use in an organization, to synthesize an image of that group’s reality, and to make it available for consideration and reflection by the group members. Second, interpretive-critical scholarship, to be useful, “must become critical” and have a goal of “appropriately directed action as well as understanding” (p. 139). As Deetz explains, the task of interpretive-critical research is to not only reveal blockages and repressions in organizations and the forces that sustain them, but to also provide appropriate action to overcome them. Finally, interpretive-critical scholars must seek to formulate new concepts for organizational members and researchers in such a way as to “enhance understanding of organizational life” (p. 140). Deetz explains that researchers must produce “*phronesis* – practical wisdom” along with “*theoris* – theoretical knowledge” from the scholar’s critical reflections on their interpretive observations (p. 141).

To achieve their goals, interpretive-critical scholars often draw on the metaphor of voice to represent organizations (Putnam & Boys, 2006; Putnam, et al., 1996). The metaphor of voice has evolved primarily from three theoretical traditions: rhetorical theory, critical theory and feminist theory. Using a voice metaphor, organizational communication scholars examine individuals' experiences of speaking, hearing and being heard in organizations in critical ways. The organization-as-voice metaphor takes as its primary interest the practices and structures that affect who can speak, when, and in what way. Putnam, Phillips and Chapman cluster the voice metaphor into four subcategories, including: distorted voices (Alvesson, 1993; Deetz, 1992a), voices of domination (Deetz, 1992a, 1992b), different voices (Bullis, 1993; Buzzanell, 1994), and access to voice (Cheney, 1995; Deetz, 1992a).

Frank (2005) explains that the interpretive-critical approach to research embraces a dialogic goal. Such a dialogic focus "emphasizes research participants' engagement in their own struggles of becoming" (p. 986). Traditional, post-positivist research often uses individuals' experiences to craft a finalized depiction of how individuals encounter a phenomenon (like resettlement). Frank argues, however, that such depictions fail to provide the most ethical account of individuals because individuals are not fixed in either their experiences or understandings, but are constantly (re)interpreting the world around them. Dialogic research, then, seeks to report themes and trends in individual experiences "not as a final statement of who research participants are, but as one move in a continuing dialogue through which those participants will continue to form themselves" (p. 967). Thus, dialogic interpretive-critical research highlights individual struggles and



experiences “in all their ambivalence and unfinalizability” (p. 972). When viewed through a dialogic interpretive-critical lens, a more complicated and complete understanding of the tensions present in the communicative interactions which characterize resettlement organizations will emerge.

This study takes a similar view of voice in organizations. I adopt an interpretive-critical position because I am primarily interested in how the experiences of communicative tensions are produced and reproduced in interactions in ways that both enable and constrain the voices of refugees and staff in refugee resettlement organizations. Furthermore, given the previous research on staff-client communication in general and staff-refugee communication in particular in mediating organizations (see Papa, Singhal & Papa, 2005; Steimel 2010; Trethewey, 1997), it appears that communication in mediating organizations is characterized by a variety of tensions and contradictions which might be productively explored in this way.

### **A Partial Pilot Study**

In order to prepare for my dissertation, I carried out a small partial pilot study (Steimel, 2010) to understand some of the communicative tensions refugees faced as they communicated in nonprofit organizational contexts. Specifically, my study explored the dialectical tensions Sudanese refugees faced in communicating with the organizations designed to make their resettlement successful. Five Sudanese refugees participated in semi-structured interviews about their experiences communicating with nonprofit workers in refugee resettlement organizations. Four dialectical tensions emerged from participants’ stories about their communication in and with nonprofit organizations.

Refugees' communication with workers in nonprofit organizations was characterized by tensions between: (a) dissemination and dialogue, (b) emancipation and control, (c) empowerment and oppression and (d) integration and separation. Taken as a totality, these challenges demonstrated four ways that communication tensions affect mediation in nonprofit refugee resettlement organizations. This study had four important limitations. First, the sample size of refugees interviewed was quite small. Second, the nonprofit employees who interacted with the refugees were not interviewed, limiting our understanding of the extent to which the tensions were jointly experienced/understood. Third, while these four dialectical tensions are important, organizational tensions are not limited to dialectical tensions. Trethewey and Ashcraft (2004) explain that irony, paradox and double binds are also important organizational tensions (See review, Chapter 2). This pilot study, therefore, identified a few, but certainly not all, tensions faced by refugee resettlement organizations. Finally, I did not ask the refugees specifically how they chose to respond to those tensions they experienced. This dissertation hopes, therefore, to extend on this exploratory study by developing our understanding of communicating with/through tensions in the refugee resettlement context.

## **Research Design**

### **Comparative Case Study Research**

In this study, I adopt a comparative case study approach to analyzing how communication functions in tensional ways for refugee-clients and staff of voluntary refugee resettlement organizations. Comparative case study research, as a subset of interpretive-critical theory building, is a method for exploring the particularity and

complexity of multiple cases in order to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of relationships in a particular context (Eisenhardt, 1989). Such analysis allows the researcher to explore how lessons learned from a series of cases can provide perspective on a larger social problem (Creswell, 2007; Eisenhardt, 1989; Stake, 1995).

Case studies are the preferred strategy of research when “the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (Yin, 1984, p. 13). Furthermore, case study research is an especially suitable method of choice “when the phenomenon under study is not readily distinguishable from its context” (Yin, 2003, p. 4). This study engages in a deeper understanding of how communication functions generally in voluntary mediating organizations. Because the communicative interactions of refugee clients and staff members in mediating organizations occurs in a contemporary real-life context that cannot realistically be separated from the refugee resettlement organizations in which it occurs, a case study approach is particularly appropriate for this study. By studying two mediating organizations in depth, a clearer understanding of how interaction is experienced within them will emerge.

Specifically, case study is a research method which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within spatial-temporal settings, for instance in an organization, a group or a geographic space (Eisenhardt, 1989). A multiple case study approach, then, combines a series of case studies and draws comparisons across cases. A multiple case study approach may be used both in an exploratory way to provide description of a series

of cases (Ogawa & Malen, 1991; Yin, 1991) and in a more systematic way to generate and extend theory (e.g. Gersick, 1988; S. G. Harris & Sutton, 1986).

Building theory from case study research begins with a strategic selection of cases (Eisenhardt, 1989). As Yin (2009) explains, case study research differs from other forms of research which might rely on random sampling to select research cases. Case study research, rather, relies on theoretical sampling or the selection of cases that are likely to offer “exemplary instances of the phenomenon being studied” (Yin, 2003, p. 10). This means that each of the cases selected will reflect strong examples of the phenomenon of interest. Furthermore, cases selected should be similar enough to allow some comparison across cases, but reflect some contextual or situational differences in order to allow richer comparisons to evolve (see Yin, 1984). Selecting cases in this way allows researchers to replicate or extend emergent theory (Eisenhardt, 1989).

### **Refugee Resettlement Organizational Cases**

For the purposes of this study, two refugee resettlement organizational cases were selected: the religious voluntary mediating organization Catholic Social Services of Southern Nebraska and the secular voluntary mediating organization Community Action Partnership of Lancaster and Saunders Counties (formerly the Lincoln Action Program). I will introduce each of them here.

**Catholic Social Services of Southern Nebraska.** Catholic Social Services of Southern Nebraska is the Lincoln, Nebraska branch of the larger Catholic Charities, USA network. Catholic Charities, USA is the national network of local Catholic Charities agencies and affiliates in the United States. Catholic Charities, USA seeks to provide

“strong leadership and support to enhance the work of local agencies in their efforts to reduce poverty, support families and empower communities” (Catholic Charities USA, 2011b). Catholic Charities was founded under the name National Conference of Catholic Charities in 1910 on the campus of Catholic University of America in Washington, D. C. Its aim was to promote the creation of Catholic Charities branches in Roman Catholic dioceses across the United States and “to encourage professional social work practice, to bring a sense of solidarity among those in charitable ministries, and to be the attorney for the poor” (Catholic Charities USA, 2011b). In the one hundred years since its founding, Catholic Charities, USA has expanded substantially and now serves an estimated nine million people of all faiths each year (Catholic Charities USA, 2011b).

The vision of Catholic Charities, USA is to “work with individuals, families, and communities to help them meet their needs, address their issues, eliminate oppression, and build a just and compassionate society” (Catholic Charities USA, 2011c). This vision is based on the belief “in the presence of God in our midst” and the proclamation of “the sanctity of human life and the dignity of the person” (Catholic Charities USA, 2011c). Ultimately, then, these works of social justice are defined as “sharing in the mission of Jesus given to the Church” (Catholic Charities USA, 2011c).

Despite this explicitly religious imperative, Catholic Charities, USA explains that Catholic Charities workers and volunteers respect the religious beliefs of those they serve. Specifically, Catholic Charities staff are asked to “not even keep statistics on the religious affiliation of those who come to us” (Catholic Charities USA, 2011a). The Fact Page titled “10 Ways Catholic Charities are Catholic” explains that this mission to serve

those of all faiths is also explicitly derived from their understanding of Jesus' teachings.

Catholic Charities explains:

We see this in Jesus' own ministry, where he cured the daughter of the Canaanite woman in Mathew 15 and the Centurion's servant in Luke 7. We are Catholic precisely in our respect for others' religious beliefs. Many people come to Catholic Charities for particular needs... They do not seek or need religious proselytizing, nor would our staff and volunteers offer it. (Catholic Charities USA, 2011a)

As a result, Catholic Charities as an organization claims to hold paramount their "determined position to serve the entire community," regardless of faith, dependent on need (Catholic Charities USA, 2011a).

Though Catholic Charities broadly is involved in a wide variety of social services provision, for the purposes of this study, I am particularly interested in Catholic Charities' involvement in Refugee Resettlement. According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Migration and Refugee Services Division (2010), Catholic social teaching argues that as beings created in God's image; all people have the right to a dignified life. Refugees displaced by war, natural disaster, famine or persecution are denied these basic rights. Though local parishes had been organizing for and supporting refugee resettlement for much longer, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops founded the Migration and Refugee Services Division in 1975 to serve as part of Catholic Charities, USA's national coordinating and support structure for local parishes and dioceses. Thus, between 1975 and 2004, the national Catholic Charities

network has resettled nearly 900,000 refugees throughout the United States (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2010a).

The Migration and Refugee Services division of Catholic Charities receives funding from a wide variety of sources to support its resettlement of refugees in the United States. Catholic Charities receives a number of grants from the United States Federal Government for their involvement in refugee resettlement, including several grants from the US Department of Health and Human Services/Office of Refugee Resettlement (DHHS/ORR), the US Department of State/Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (DOS/PRM), and the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2010b). Additionally, Catholic Charities has received some private grants, including a Ford Foundation grant and an America's Voice grant to help educate Catholics and others about immigrants and refugees in their communities and to help refugees integrate into American communities. Finally, Catholic Charities is supported by donations and other financial support from Roman Catholic parishes, dioceses and other religious orders (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2010b). This variety of funding sources inevitably places restrictions on how funding can be used. For example, in addition to the Catholic Charities position advocating aid for all peoples, regardless of their faith, rules for Department of Health and Human Services Grants state that:

Organizations that receive direct financial assistance from the Department under any Department program may not engage in inherently religious activities such as religious instruction, worship, or proselytization as part of the programs or

services funded with direct financial assistance from the Department. Therefore, organizations must take steps to separate, in time or location, their inherently religious activities from the services funded under this program. (Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2011)

As a result, though inspired and supported by their Catholic faith, Catholic Charities Division of Migration and Refugee services is explicitly prohibited from proselytizing or in other ways encouraging their Catholicism in the refugees they serve.

Catholic Social Services of Southern Nebraska (CSS) is the local branch of the larger Catholic Charities network operating in the Catholic Diocese of Lincoln under Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz. This local CSS organization has two primary missions. First, CSS's Department of Social Services "meets the material needs of people, extending the love of Christ and the Church through programs in food, shelter, clothing, material and financial assistance, refugee resettlement, and special holiday projects" (Catholic Social Services of Southern Nebraska, 2006). Second, CSS's Immaculate Heart of Mary Counseling Center provides a community-based mental health service system for the Diocese of Lincoln (Catholic Social Services of Southern Nebraska, 2006).

Again, for the purposes of this study, I am particularly interested in the involvement of Catholic Social Services of Southern Nebraska in Refugee Resettlement. Beginning with Europeans left homeless by World War II and Cubans fleeing Communism in the 1960's, the Diocese of Lincoln has been welcoming refugees for more than half a century. As part of the larger Migration and Refugee Services project, CSS of Southern Nebraska settles approximately 100 refugee families a year into Southern



Nebraska (Catholic Social Services of Southern Nebraska, 2006). In addition to physically bringing the families to Lincoln, CSS of Southern Nebraska provides a number of resettlement services, including: aid in securing housing, cultural orientation, food, medical and dental services, and job placement (The Diocese of Lincoln, 2009). All refugee services are designed to assist the families to achieve self-sufficiency at the earliest possible date.

According to the Director of Refugee Resettlement in a personal interview (March, 2011), Catholic Social Services of Southern Nebraska's refugee resettlement program functions as part of the Catholic religious perspective by fulfilling Jesus' call for His Church on earth to demonstrate His love for the world by showing mercy to those in need. Specifically, he explained that in the Biblical book of Matthew, Chapter 25, Jesus tells his disciples that they will be blessed as, "I was hungry, and you gave me food to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger, and you took me in; naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me" (Matthew, 25: 35-36). When the disciples expressed confusion as to how they had provided those services to Christ, he responds, "Most assuredly I tell you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (Matthew, 25: 40). Thus, according to the Director of Refugee Resettlement, ministering to refugees by providing food and drink, shelter, clothing and other services is part of the Church's fundamental calling by Christ.

CSS employs a small staff full-time to work with resettled refugee families. The Director of Refugee Resettlement coordinates the local Refugee Resettlement

Program(including funding, staffing and legal requirements). Additionally, he employs two full-time case workers who jointly serve approximately 200 refugee families from all over the world at any one time (Personal Interview, Director of Refugee Resettlement, September 2010). These staff members are specifically tasked with the project of “resettlement” – helping refugee families arrive in the United States, find housing, food, clothing, jobs and other basic necessities of everyday life. In addition to this very small specific staff, Catholic Social Services employs a number of staff in other programs who also help serve refugees as a part of their wider client pool (e.g. in housing assistance, food assistance and counseling programs). Finally, Catholic Social Services uses the help of a fairly large and rotating pool of volunteers who help refugees learn English, drive refugees to doctors’ appointments, help refugees read and answer mail and many other day to day tasks.

Catholic Social Services of Southern Nebraska was selected as one of the cases in this case study primarily because they are one of the primary organizations which actually brings refugees to the city of Lincoln and begins their resettlement process here. Thus, when I interviewed refugees in my small pilot study, all of them mentioned that CSS was their first organizational contact in the city of Lincoln. This makes CSS an important case for analysis.

### **Community Action Partnership of Lancaster and Saunders Counties.**

President Lyndon Baines Johnson’s 1960s War on Poverty arose from his ongoing concern that America had not done enough to provide socioeconomic opportunities for the underclass. During the Kennedy administration, the number of American families

living in poverty had actually risen for the first time since the Great Depression. Furthermore, the number of children on Welfare programs had increased from 1.6 million in 1950 to 2.4 million in 1960 and was still on the rise. As a result, Johnson-led task forces came up with plans for a community action program that would establish a community action agency or CAA in each city and county to coordinate all federal and state programs designed to help by poor. By 1967, the Johnson administration ceded control of the local CAAs to local city and county governments and to private agencies and by the end of his administration nearly 1,000 such local CAAs were in operation ("Lyndon Baines Johnson: Domestic affairs," 2011).

The national Community Action Partnership agency is the nonprofit, national membership organization representing the interests of the 1,100 Community Action Agencies (CAAs) across the country that annually “help 17 million low-income Americans achieve economic security” (Community Action Partnership, 2011b). The service areas of these CAAs now cover 96 percent of the nation’s counties (Community Action Partnership, 2011a).

Founded in 1964 as part of President Johnson’s community action program, Community Action Partnership of Lancaster and Saunders’ Counties (until March 2010 operating under the name Lincoln Action Program) is a private, nonprofit community action agency (CAA) which offers support services to low income individuals and families in the Southern Nebraska counties of Lancaster and Saunders. The mission of Lincoln Action Program was specifically to enhance “the self-sufficiency and quality of life of families with low incomes” in the counties it serves by providing services support

and opportunities (Family Resource Center Coalition of Nebraska, 2007). To accomplish that mission, Lincoln Action Program provided primarily three types of services: basic and emergency needs support, family development and support, and education and job skills development (Family Resource Center Coalition of Nebraska, 2007).

As previously mentioned, Community Action Partnership operated under the name Lincoln Action Program until March 1, 2010. The name switch happened as “part of an ongoing national initiative to highlight anti-poverty efforts under way at Community Action Agencies across the country” (“Lincoln Action Program changing name,” 2010) Specifically, Vi See, former executive director of the then Lincoln Action Program, argued that while Lincoln Action Program was part of the larger Community Action Partnership network, few people even in the city of Lincoln were aware of that connection. As a result, Don Mathis, President and CEO of the Community Action Partnership argued, “as Lincoln Action Program and other Community Action Agencies across the country introduce and continue using the new name and logo on their offices, websites, stationary, and brochures, the public will begin to recognize these local agencies as being part of one national network” (Christensen, 2010).

As part of the rebranding as Community Action Partnership of Lancaster and Saunders Counties (CAP), CAP adopted a new vision and mission statement to guide their services. Their 2011 mission statement is to “empower people struggling in poverty to reach their full potential and achieve self-reliance” (Community Action Partnership of Lincoln and Saunders Counties, 2011a). To reach that self-reliance goal, CAP provides case management to low-income families through a partnership style in which “the

family and case manager work on mutually-defined goals to move the family towards self-sufficiency” (NEBHANDS & Lincoln Action Program, 2003). In the 2010 fiscal year, CAP of Lancaster and Saunders counties served 13,000 unduplicated individuals in Southern Nebraska communities (Community Action Partnership of Lincoln and Saunders Counties, 2011b).

Community Action Partnership of Lancaster and Saunders Counties operates on an annual budget of approximately \$10 million and employs 100 full and part-time staff members. Sources of revenue consist of all levels of government, charitable organizations, businesses, private groups, individuals and user fees. Specifically, government grant support accounts for about \$8 million dollars of the operating budget, while program and consulting revenue, community support and CAP foundation support provide the majority of the remaining \$2 million of the budget (Community Action Partnership, 2010).

For the purposes of this study, I am particularly interested in the involvement of Community Action Partnership of Lancaster and Saunders Counties in refugee resettlement. After noting the rising number of refugees resettling in Lincoln, and the attendant issues of poverty, unemployment and lack of housing many refugees faced, CAP began a Center for Refugees and Immigrants (CRI) in 2004 whose goal is to support refugees, immigrants, and asylees in achieving self-sufficiency (Lincoln Action Program, 2007). The primary goals of the CRI include: (1) to evaluate career goals of refugees, and assist with career advancement, (2) to help clients find employment, (3) to aid in acquiring proper employment documentation, and (4) to reinforce the importance

of United States citizenship for career advancement. To support those goals, CAP provides a number of services to refugee-clients, including career counseling, resume building, job search/placement, career advancement training, work authorization documentation assistance, housing assistance, ESL/naturalization/educational support classes, immigration/naturalization support, interpretation/translation services, and scheduling appointments with and transportation to the Immigration Office. The program is primarily funded through general grants from the United States Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement and through the specific *Targeted Assistance Discretionary Grant* (also awarded by DHHS's Office of Refugee Resettlement) (Lincoln Action Program, 2007). Unlike Catholic Social Services which actually brings refugees to the United States (by paying for their plane tickets and coordinating travel), Community Action Partnership of Lancaster and Saunders Counties assists refugees once they have arrived in the United States.

The CAP Center for Refugees and Immigrants employs a full time Center for Refugees and Immigrants Coordinator and two part-time Interns in the program whose role is to specifically aid refugee and other migrants through the acquisition of CAP services. Additionally, nearly 100 others are employed by CAP in the other service divisions (including education, housing assistance, employment assistance, etc.) and several of those divisions have program staff (e.g. case managers) who are uniquely assigned to serve refugee families (for instance, there is an Arabic family case manager in one of the educational programs for Arabic speaking refugee families). The Community Action Partnership was selected as a case for this case study for three reasons. First, in

my small pilot study, the refugees I spoke to all listed the Community Action Partnership (or Lincoln Action Program) as their most helpful organizational contact in the city of Lincoln. Thus, the CAP appears to play a significant role in refugee resettlement in the city. Second, in an informal informational interview with the Center for Refugees and Immigrants director, he described communication between refugees and organizational workers as one of the primary struggles faced by his organization. Finally, as a secular organization, funded primarily by the United States Government, this organization provides a potential contrast to the previously mentioned Catholic Social Services, giving this comparative case study more depth.

Overall, both of these organizations constitute voluntary organizations in the Berger and Neuhaus (1977, 1996) sense because they are each “a body of people who have voluntarily organized themselves in pursuit of particular goals” (Berger & Neuhaus, 1996, p. 194). As Berger and Neuhaus explain, “For our purposes, the crucial point is the free association of people for some collective purpose, the fact that they may pay some individuals for doing work to this end not being decisive” (p. 194). Ultimately, therefore, Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership are voluntary organizations, voluntarily organized by individuals to serve the collective social purposes of reducing poverty and providing support to refugees resettling in Nebraskan communities.

## **Procedures**

### **Data Collection**

Building theory from case study research requires the combination of multiple forms of data, including: interviews, archives, documents and observations in order to

create a rich and detailed account of a particular case (Eisenhardt, 1989; Stake, 1995). That is, the triangulation made possible by multiple data collection methods provides stronger substantiation of constructs and theoretical implications. As such, for this study I engaged in three types of data collection for each of the organizations (cases) studied: document collection, participant observation, and participant interviews.

**Document Collection.** First, public documents about each of the refugee resettlement organizations that discuss their organizational purposes/goals, mission statements, refugee programs, etc. were collected. According to Creswell (2007), the advantages of document analysis include: (a) allowing the researcher to obtain the language and words of informants, (b) functioning as an unobtrusive source of information, and (c) representing data that are thoughtful in that informants have given attention to compiling them.

Organizational documents come in many forms, including: organizational missions' statements/goal statements, public relations statements and press releases, organizational websites and written policies, rules or procedures, among others. As Forster (1994) notes, "these varied documentary records constitute a rich source of insights into different employee and group interpretations of organizational life, because they are one of the principal by-products of the interactions and communication of individuals and groups, at all levels of the organization" (p. 148).

For this study, I collected documents in three ways. First, I examined the websites of both Catholic Social Services of Southern Nebraska and Community Action Partnership of Lancaster and Saunders Counties and downloaded all documents



(brochures, applications, etc.) on their websites related to refugee resettlement. Second, when I went to visit both organizations, I collected public documents from their waiting areas. Finally, when I spoke with participants in each organization, several participants provided me with additional organizational documents, including organizational checklists and policy statements. This resulted in 19 pages of single spaced documents from Catholic Social Services of Southern Nebraska and 49 pages of single spaced documents from Community Action Partnership of Lancaster and Saunders Counties. This resulted in 68 total pages of documents to analyze. Such documents contextualize the organizations and place them historically, creating a better overall picture of each individual case.

**Participant Observation.** Second, to the extent possible, I engaged in observation at both organizations. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), in the role of participant-as-observer, researchers enter an organization or setting with an openly acknowledged investigative purpose. The participant-as-observer observes the day-to-day ongoing activity of a group, organization, or location by attending meetings, watching staff/client interactions and by otherwise observing the goings-on in a place. However, unlike a complete observer who may only take notes passively in the background, a participant observer also interacts with those in the scene, asking questions, seeking explanations and otherwise engaging individuals in meaning-making about what the researcher has observed (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

To engage in observation, I attended public meetings (including English Language Classes and Cultural Orientation Sessions) and I observed the communicative

interactions between staff and refugee-clients. As Lindlof and Taylor argue, observation allows a researcher to better understand the dynamics of a situation or interaction by allowing a researcher to observe practices that participants may fail to mention or may be unaware of themselves. Thus, these observations help contextualize interactions described by participants to better inform an overall picture of each individual case (See Appendix C).

Because of privacy concerns of the nonprofit agencies on behalf of the refugee clients, my opportunities for observation were limited. First, I did two hours of participant observation in the building of Catholic Social Services of Southern Nebraska. During these two hours, I sat in public areas (including the waiting room and a volunteer lounge). I observed refugees and migrants interacting with front desk staff and volunteers and I observed volunteers interacting with one another (while completing tasks like assembling letters to mail). During these interactions, I took notes about what was being said, by whom and to whom, and I noted characteristics of the setting that seemed to affect the interactions. Second, I did five hours of participant observation at Community Action Partnership, by attending both Cultural Orientation Sessions and English Language Classes taught by Community Action Partnership employees and volunteers for their refugee clients. In these classes, I again took notes about what was being said, by whom and to whom, and I noted characteristics of the setting that seemed to affect the interactions. Further, I briefly and informally interviewed one of the women and one of the men conducting the Cultural Orientation sessions about what was being covered and

why. After each of these observation opportunities, I went home and typed up my field notes. These field notes were added to the overall data analysis.

**Semi-Structured Interviews.** Finally, the major way in which interpretive researchers seek to understand the experiences, perceptions and understandings of individuals is through in-depth semi-structured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2004). The goal of an interpretive research interview is “to see the research topic from the perspective of the interviewee and to understand how or why he or she comes to have this particular perspective” (King, 1994, p. 14). To accomplish this goal, Rubin and Rubin (2004) describe semi-structured interviews as a chance for researchers and participants to engage in an in-depth conversation about a particular series of subjects guided by an interview protocol.

My interview protocol consists of a series of open-ended questions which were designed to encourage both staff and refugee-clients of refugee resettlement organizations to elaborate on their ideas and experiences related to communicative interactions in voluntary organizations and the communicative tensions that emerge as a result. An interview protocol was developed based both on the goals of the study and based on the feedback received in the small pilot pre-study. The individual interviews also explored the ways in which staff and clients responded to the communication tensions they experienced and whether they felt those engagements were helpful or productive. Using this protocol as a guide for discussion, the individual interviews were tape-recorded for later transcription (see Appendices A and B).

Interviews were conducted in a location selected by the respondent as comfortable to him/her. Refugees were interviewed in locations including: my office on campus, campus student unions, participants' workplaces (offices and break areas) and participants' homes. Interviews with organizational staff were all conducted in their workplaces (offices and break areas).

### **Participants**

Organizational staff members were defined as those individuals who represent the refugee resettlement organizations to refugee clients. As Berger and Neuhaus (1996) argue, voluntary organizations may be comprised of either paid or volunteer staffing, or both. For the purposes of this study, I did not make a distinction between paid and unpaid staff, in part because refugee-clients are unlikely to know whether the organizational staff person to whom they are speaking receives a pay check. Thus, in terms of the interactional experiences between refugees and organizational staff members, the issue of pay versus volunteer work is not a factor I engaged during this study.

Organizational staff were recruited through a snowball sampling method, in which the directors of each organization provided me with additional names and contact information of workers and volunteers on their staff, and then those individuals also recommended others who might be interested in speaking with me.

Organizational staff did not receive any direct personal benefit for participation in the study. However, an executive summary of the study's results (in which all identifying participant information has been removed) was provided to each organizational staff participant. Both organizations' directors have expressed a desire to learn from the

findings ways in which their organizations might improve communication with refugee-clients.

Overall, I conducted nine interviews with eight members of Catholic Social Services of Southern Nebraska (the refugee resettlement director was interviewed twice). Three staff members were paid employees and five staff were volunteers. The eight interviewees were nearly evenly split in terms of sex, three men and five women. Six staff members were native born United States citizens, one staff member was a migrant from China and a final staff member was a migrant from “the Caribbean” (she declined to say which country). This resulted in 55 pages of single-spaced transcripts from Catholic Social Services. I also conducted nine interviews with seven members of Community Action Partnership of Lincoln and Saunders’ Counties (the refugee and immigrant coordinator and his assistant were each interviewed twice). Six of the staff interviewed were paid staff members and one was a volunteer. The seven interviewees were nearly evenly split in terms of sex, three participants were male and four female. One staff member was a refugee from Bosnia, but all of the remaining staff members were native born United States citizens. This resulted in 53 pages of single-spaced transcripts from Community Action Partnership.

In order to protect their privacy, organizational staff workers were given pseudonyms to mask their identities in my results section. Because the average age of my organizational staff participants was approximately 40 years old, I used the US Social Security Administration’s list of the most common names in the United States in the 1970’s as the source of my pseudonyms (see <http://www.ssa.gov/oact>

[/babynames/decades/names1970s.html](#)). Catholic Social Services Participants were named first, and then Community Action Partnership Participants. In other words, the first female I interviewed from Catholic Social Services received the most common female name of the 1970s; the second female I interviewed received the second most common female name, etc.

Refugee-clients were allowed to self-identify as refugees. Though the actual status of “refugee” is discursively constructed in the interaction between host populations, governments, non-governmental organizations and the refugees themselves (Hardy, et al., 2001), for the purposes of this study I allowed individuals to self-identify because of the practical difficulty of requiring proof of refugee status from my interviewees. Moreover, based on the information available on their websites, most of the organizations (especially non-governmental organizations) that serve refugees allow refugees to identify themselves as refugees. As a result, self-identification seems like an appropriate way to access the same population that would be participating in organizations designed to help mediate refugee resettlement.

Refugee-participants were a very difficult group of participants to recruit for two reasons. First, many potential refugee participants were, understandably given their life histories, apprehensive of answering questions about their personal lives. Though I assured their anonymity, many potential participants were comfortable discussing their experiences with someone who works for a state university (and is thus technically a government employee). Second, a significant subset of potential refugee participants were not comfortable communicating in English. Though I offered to allow participants

to select the language in which they wanted to be interviewed, perhaps language barriers prevented some refugees from contacting me (or returning my calls) at all. Finally, logistical complications (including busy work schedules, lack of reliable transportation and other such barriers) may have created a disincentive to participate. At least half of my potential refugee respondents had to cancel and reschedule at least once (many without notice), and some failed to arrive for interviews at all and were unwilling or unable to return my subsequent calls. Furthermore, one potential refugee respondent arrived and met with me, only to explain that he had decided after speaking with his wife that he was no longer comfortable sharing his ideas. Therefore, participants were gathered using a convenience/snowball sampling technique where I asked local social service agencies to provide details about my study and contact information to refugees they believed might be interested in my study. I also then asked participants if they knew anyone who would like to participate in the study. Refugees were given an honorarium of \$20 for their time participating in the study, which was funded by the previously described grant from Great Plains Studies.

For this study, I interviewed eleven refugees to the United States who had resettled in Nebraska. The majority of the refugees interviewed were from African nations (including six from Sudan, one from Ethiopia and one from Senegal), two refugees were from Iran and one was from Afghanistan. The refugees were given the choice whether to be interviewed in English or in their native language (with the help of a translator). All but one of the refugees selected to be interviewed in English. One Sudanese woman chose to communicate in her language of Neur, and she asked that her

college-aged son serve as her translator. Six of the refugees interviewed were male and five were female. Overall, the refugee interviews resulted in 68 pages of single-spaced transcripts.

In order to protect their privacy, refugee-participants were also given pseudonyms to mask their identities in my results section. Given the varied national, ethnic and cultural traditions of my participants, I did not want to oversimplify their identities by naming diverse refugees “Jane” or “Bob.” Instead, I followed a similar procedure described above and did a search of the most common names of each of their home countries. Thus, to the best of my ability, the male refugee from Ethiopia received the most common male name in Ethiopia, etc. These names are certainly not entirely reflective of each refugee’s unique cultural origins. Obviously, the commonness of names in nations in Africa and the Middle East vary not only by country, but by ethnic tribe, religion, and language spoken, just to name a few factors. But, searching names by nation provided a compromise between honoring refugees’ heritage while at the same time not providing so much detail (e.g. about ethnic tribe or language) so as to “out” their identities in their own refugee communities.

## **Data Analysis**

**Data Preparation.** To prepare the data for analysis, collected documents were assembled for each of the organizations. My detailed notes from participant observations were typed up. Further, each of my semi-structured interviews was transcribed near-verbatim. I did not transcribe the small vocal flubs or vocal fillers of my participants (including ums, uhs and such). However, I did transcribe every actual word expressed by



the participants in order to capture their unique perspective. Finally, I included the documents collected from each organization. In total, this resulted in over 250 single-spaced pages of data to analyze.

**Analysis.** As Jensen (1989) observes, interviewing “is a very efficient generator of language, so that, ultimately, the qualitative researcher finds himself/herself face to face with a mass of data which requires some form of textual analysis” (p. 99, c. f. Lindlof, 1995, p. 234). After collecting and reading the organizational documents and transcribing the participant interviews, the data were analyzed using data “reduction” and “interpretation” (Creswell, 2007; Lindlof, 1995; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Once the interviews are transcribed, sought to answer the research questions by following the six-step thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). According to Braun and Clarke, thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns which emerge from the data. Because this project sought to identify the communicative tensions experienced by refugee-participants and organizational workers, this provided an appropriate method for identifying the tensions experienced by refugees in their interview accounts. First, I engaged in a repeated close reading of the transcripts to gain a greater understanding of what they contain. Second, I identified themes in the data by reading through the data and jotting down categories which appear to be consistent across both interview transcripts. Third, I collated coded data were into those identified categories or themes, broadening and narrowing the categories as necessary to get at the underlying meaning of the data. Fourth, I checked to ensure that all of the potential tensions or themes actually fit the data in the coded extracts. Fifth, I defined and

named the themes and finally I selected vivid, compelling extracts from the data to represent each theme. By following this six step procedure, I was able to identify the primary communicative tensions experienced by both the refugee-clients and the organizational workers in these refugee resettlement organizations. I also identified the strategies each group uses to respond to those tensions as they are encountered.

Finally, I sought to use those themes and other data collected about each case, given the sensitizing lens of interpretive-critical theory, to develop suggestions for meaningfully engaging those tensions, through communication, in more socially just ways.

To establish interpretive validity and reliability in this study, I relied on “thick description” (see Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), triangulation, and member checks. First the goal of interpretive validity is to establish the “credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation or interpretation” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 106) or the adequacy and completeness of the description of individuals’ experiences (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Good interpretive scholarship, then, establishes interpretive validity by including detailed accounts both of the context in which they were working and by including extensive segments of the accounts offered by participants in their own words. By including such description, readers can peer reviewers can determine whether scholarly conclusions seem valid representations of the data.

Second, interpretive scholars establish validity through triangulation (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995) in which researchers use multiple data sources (e.g. interviews, participant-observation, textual analysis) to establish that their conclusions reflect various

accounts of the experience. Good interpretive research should reflect rich and varied expressions of the experience. By using multiple data sources for my case studies, a more complete (valid, reliable) picture of the data can be established.

Third, interpretive scholars establish validity through member checking (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Stake, 1995) in which parts of raw data or of analysis might be returned to participant(s) to determine whether they resonate with their experiences. Good interpretive research should resonate in some way with participant experiences. Throughout my interviewing process, I shared my initial findings with one refugee-respondent and with one organizational worker-respondent (the director of one of the organizations) to ensure that my results are reflective of participant experiences.

**Structuring the Results.** When I first began data collection, based on my presumptions that members of a secular organization and a religious organization would likely have different understandings of who their organizations were and why they were involved in resettlement, I had intended to separate Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership into different results chapters. However, as I conducted my interviews, it became clear that not only would that be unnecessary, it would be unwise. Though there are subtle differences both in why each of these organizations chooses to serve refugees and how they choose to serve them, the organizational staff from both organizations were clear that they did not believe that those differences were relevant to (or even noticed by) the refugees they served. For instance, when I spoke with the refugee resettlement coordinator at Catholic Social Services, I asked him if he felt his

organization's status as Catholic distinguished it from other nonprofit refugee resettlement organizations. He responded:

I don't think so. I don't think anybody thinks about it. We have a lot of the refugees now come to us and ask us for a letter verifying that they are settled here because they want to go back home and they came over as refugees in the 90's and so their government wants this letter from them, saying, "hey, why did you leave the country?"... and half of them don't even know who their agency was. They can't tell you if it was Catholic Charities or a different charity or whatever. A lot of the secondary migrants who come to us for services come from other states and maybe have been in the country a month or two months... "Okay, what agency settled you in San Antonio?" "I have no idea." So no, I don't think being called the Catholic Social Services or the Conference of Catholic Bishops has any bearing on them in terms of who we are and what our role is.

Furthermore, the director made clear that the terms and conditions under which the US Conference of Catholic Bishops receives resettlement funding from the Federal Government for refugee resettlement explicitly prohibit Catholic volunteers and workers from proselytizing or from discriminating based on faith in any way. This lack of distinction between agencies was mirrored in refugee accounts. For instance, when I asked Muna (Female, Afghanistan) if she perceived any differences in refugee resettlement agencies based on faith, she answered "I have not noticed that." Similarly, when asked about whether he felt as if Catholic Social Services operated differently than secular nonprofit organizations, Mamadou (Male, Senegal) responded, "They don't really

discriminate in terms of religion, but it is a Christian one.” When asked how those differences manifested themselves, he explained that the decorations of their offices included Jesus and that there was Christian music playing in the background. But, other than those symbolic differences, he didn’t believe there were practical differences in treatment.

Perhaps the most striking evidence of the lack of difference (from the perspective of refugees) between Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership is that, like the description provided by the director of Catholic Social Services, the refugees I interviewed often could not remember from which organization they received any particular aid. For instance, Anai (Male, Sudan) explained:

It was Catholic Charities that helped us you know, there were people who work with them who helped us go to appointments, go shopping to the store, and maybe go to some of the, like when there’s clothes distribution, at church. So, they would take us there if we see something that we like we’d grab it and bring it home. So, that was really helpful. So, when we moved here, *um I don’t remember*. The only, it wasn’t like, *it was probably part of an organization*. One lady worked through Lincoln Action Program [Community Action Partnership], and she would give my mom and some other Sudanese ladies ride home after class, *so that’s something that is, I think, through Lincoln Action Program*. [Emphasis mine].

Overall, then, the refugees I interviewed had all received services from both nonprofit organizations and frequently could not or did not care to distinguish between them.

Despite this lack of difference in perceived service, I, naively perhaps, expected a difference in the rationales for why organizational staff (both paid and volunteer) chose to work with (or volunteer with) their selected organization. Given that Catholic Social Services offers an explicitly Catholic rationale for service (on its website and other organizational documents) and displays religious iconography throughout their Lincoln office, I expected religiosity to play some part in why individuals chose to work or volunteer with Catholic Social Services. I did not expect the same religiosity in the rationale from those at Community Action Partnership.

However, when asked some version of, “So why did you decide to work at/volunteer for Catholic Social Services/Community Action Partnership?” The responses I received were surprisingly similar. Of the fifteen organizational staff I interviewed across the two organizations, no one responded with explicitly religious language (e.g. “as a reflection of my faith” or “The Bible calls us to serve,” etc.) One Catholic Social Services volunteer, Jason, mentioned that he read about the opportunity to volunteer in his (presumably Catholic) “church bulletin.” However, he did not see his service as particularly Godly. In fact, he later recounted that when a Burundian refugee told him that “God sent me to him, I thought, this is totally ridiculous. I mean, that is nice to hear, but I don’t know what you are talking about... I thought who the hell knows? I’m not that particularly religious.”

Instead, the vast majority of my organizational staff participants from both organizations expressed that they had chosen to work or volunteer in this field because they enjoyed meeting new people from global places and particularly enjoyed learning

about other cultural groups. For instance, Lisa (CAP) explained, “I enjoy the people that I meet, and like finding out about people, like where they came from. I’ve like learned so much and like I’ve really broadened my perspective. It’s like I can go many places and just by going to work and by hearing all of their stories and stuff it is kind of like I am traveling.” Similarly, Michael (CSS) explains that he works for Catholic Social Services because it allows him to “continu[e] to have a connection with different parts of the world. I was glad. I have my map and whenever we have new clients, I can always look up and see where they’re coming from. You just learn so much about what’s going on in the rest of the world. That’s been the best part.” Christopher (CSS) summarized the theme I heard again and again from staff in both organizations when he said that he volunteered because of “The culture stuff. And, just talking to them and getting to know them. It’s a two way street, getting to know them and learn about their culture. It is interesting to me.” Thus, my results chapters are split based not on agency, but on research question, with Chapter 4 addressing Research Question 1, Chapter 5 addressing Research Question 2 and Chapter 6 addressing Research Question 3.

Once my data analysis was complete, I provided summary reports of my findings to organizational members at both Catholic Social Services and the Community Action Partnership. These reports were be stripped of any respondent-identifying information and were instead designed as holistic summaries of the tensions and strategies reported by multiple respondents in their interactions with and through these agencies. Given this background on my methods, in the next chapters I detail my results.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH QUESTION 1 RESULTS**

### **REFUGEE-PARTICIPANTS' COMMUNICATIVE EXPERIENCES IN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT ORGANIZATIONS**

In the following three chapters, the major tensions that emerged through my analysis of the accounts of the refugee-participants and the organizational staff in refugee resettlement organizations are revealed. My goal was to illustrate recurring patterns in the experiences of refugees and organizational staff that indicate the various tensions experienced by each side in this boundary-spanning form of communication. Chapter 4 addresses Research Question 1, Chapter 5 answers Research Question 2 and Chapter 6 responds to Research Question 3. Following this elucidation of emergent themes, I revisit and elaborate on those findings in Chapter 7.

My first research question asked: What tensions do refugee-clients in mediating refugee resettlement organizations experience in their communicative interactions with nonprofit employees? Based on the responses of the eleven refugees interviewed, there were five primary tension clusters which characterized their experiences, including: (a) tensions of knowledge and expertise, (b) tensions of empowerment and control, (c) tensions of rights and power, (d) tensions of openness/closedness and (e) tensions of integration and separation.

#### **Knowledge and Expertise**

According to public documents provided both by Catholic Social Services and by Community Action Partnership, the first and most pressing goal of both organizations is to provide refugees with the basic material goods and information necessary to survive in the United States. In their accounts of communication with organizational staff members



in refugee resettlement organizations, the refugee-participants in my study frequently began their stories by describing a tension they felt surrounding the role(s) of knowledge and expertise in the communication both given and received by organizational staff members in the refugee resettlement organizations. Refugee-participants repeatedly described arriving in the United States with few (if any) material belongings and little understanding of United States' cultural and commercial practices. Thus, refugees frequently described their need for, and grateful receipt of, communication from organizational workers which helped them to attain access to basic goods/services needed to live in the United States as well as practical and cultural information about life in the United States. Simultaneously, however, refugee-participants expressed a sense that the organizational staff persons' positioning as the sole "expert" on life in the United States was problematic. Refugee-participants described a sense that they also needed to be listened to, particularly as they shared their unique personal experiences and explained how the Americans' knowledge fit their particular experiences and context. Refugee-participants also expressed a desire for more organizationally-mediated communication with and from other refugees, to allow them to use other refugees' experiential expertise to meaningfully contextualize the knowledge received in communication with organizational staff.

### **Need for Knowledgeable Communication**

Initially, the refugee-participants I interviewed expressed that when they arrived in the United States, they often arrived with little in terms of either material belongings or knowledge of life in the United States. As such, the refugees described entering with a

real need for practical information to be shared with them about basic issues of survival. For instance, Ali (Male, Iran) explained, “When Iranians come here, like they have no idea what to bring, what to not to bring, how to find a house, how to buy a car, how to go how to go to Wal-Mart. For example a lot of them coming here don’t know that you can buy flatbread here. I didn’t know. I didn’t know you could buy like a lot of things here”<sup>1</sup> Thus, Ali describes a real need for basic information about life in the United States. Similarly, Muna (Female, Afghanistan) highlights how she arrived in the United States with questions about how to fill basic needs in the United States. For example, she indicated that she needed someone to share information with her:

Because you have questions on everything. You know if you could just forget about services, just simple needs. Where would be a good place to shop? The corner store, which happens to be a gas station, how do you know that the prices there are higher? ... So it is difficult because they do have a lot of questions, when you come you basically don’t know anything. Where do I get a driver’s license? How do I learn how to drive?

Beyond the need for information to help them access basic goods and services, Omar (Male, Sudan) explains that refugees also need overall help acclimating to the cultural practices of the United States. He explains, “I am one of the Sudanese refugees having a complex life story in America. I have never had a smooth life when I came here, which has been attributed partly due to culture shock.” As he continued throughout his

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<sup>1</sup> Participant quotations may, at times, adopt irregular English styles or be grammatically incorrect. In order to present the voices of participants in their own terms, I have not rewritten their statements, nor will I place [sic] after each one. Please recognize that as non-native English speakers, refugees should be given a great deal of latitude to express themselves in nonconventional ways.

interview, he elaborated by explaining that he arrived in the United States deeply in need of information about basic cultural differences between his home nation and the United States and that his failure to receive that information made his transition very difficult.

### **Communicating about Goods and Services**

Given this need for information about basic goods and services in the United States, the refugee-participants I interviewed all began their accounts of communication with nonprofit staff members at Catholic Social Services and at Community Action Partnership by expressing their appreciation for and their reliance on communication from organizational staff members to help them obtain knowledge about material goods and services immediately necessary for everyday life in the United States. Among the primary concerns for new refugees were housing, clothing and food. Several refugees described how Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership workers helped them to find and establish a place to live. For instance, Nyanath (Female, Sudan) indicated, “I think it helped my family a lot. They [Catholic Social Services] help us by find house.” This provision of access to basic services was echoed by Sittina, a female refugee from Sudan, who explained “When we first moved to Lincoln, they [Community Action Partnership] helped us to adjust. Helped us find clothes, things for our apartment. They were helpful when we arrived here.... They helped us find a house and they helped us to get food and things for the house.” In addition to housing, refugees described receiving other material assistance, including clothing. For example, Sara (Female, Sudan) explained how the wife of one of the Catholic Social Service workers “came, and bring hand-me-downs from her kids, and came to my house and let me choose what I

wanted and stuff.... When we came here they provided us housing and food and everything we needed.” These material goods were seen by my participants as critical to helping refugees establish new homes in the United States.

Beyond basic material goods, communication with organizational staff helped provide refugees with access to important services in the United States. For instance, Amare (Male, Ethiopia) described how a worker from the Community Action Partnership:

Provided me with booklets that, you know, tell you where resources are available, food resources, different kind of resources that are available, like electricity support. And then there were medical support. It was me only that had insurance, health insurance, my wife and kids didn’t have insurance. So she told me that clinic of the Heart in Lincoln they give services to immigrant and then there is the Center for People in Need on 27<sup>th</sup>, so she directed me to there also. And then we went there and my kids got free dental treatment and that was very good. And me too, I went there also and got some help.

Thus, communication from organizational workers provided knowledge of where refugees could access services like electricity payment assistance and medical and dental care upon arrival in the United States.

Finally, the refugees frequently appreciated organizational staff members in particular for providing them with knowledge about and access to English language classes in the United States. For instance, Anai (Male, Sudan) explained that Catholic Social Services staff had helped by providing a “Sudanese class, North. It’s like a Neur

[Sudanese Language] class. And then, there's like Sudanese women teaching ELL [English Language Learners Class] and helping them learn. Yeah. So, that's really a good help." Along the same lines, Amare (Male, Ethiopia) explained that a worker from Community Action Partnership helped by "finding information about adult English language program for my wife." This access to language instruction was appreciated as a practical help for life in the United States, but it was also seen as more. As Nyanath (Female, Sudan) elaborated about her interaction with organizational staff from Catholic Social Services:

They are very helpful. They do not just only help you for the learning English, also, they help you learn about America. And, one of my teachers helped me to bring my husband here. Yeah, I was really impressed with them; they helped do a lot of things to me and to my family. I really appreciate it.

Overall, refugees deeply appreciated communication which provided them with access to basic material goods in the United States.

### **Communicating about American Culture**

More than even goods and services, refugees described relying on cultural and social knowledge communicated by workers in nonprofit organizations about life in the United States. Omar, (Male, Sudan) explained, "We need complete social life orientation training." This sentiment was confirmed by Anai (Male, Sudan), who said, "coming here is like totally different, like, you have to learn a lot of things over again, or things that you have never learned." For instance, unlike many of the countries the refugees interviewed previously lived in, Nebraska frequently has very cold winters, with snow

fall and negative wind chill temperatures. When asked about the primary difference she had to learn to manage between Sudan and America, Sara (Female, Sudan) exclaimed, “I remember the snow! Thinking it was hail.” This severe cold was often described as hard on refugees emotionally. Nyanath (Female, Sudan) explained:

Because it’s very hard for, people don’t know how the situation you are in when you came from there and you come here. You feel like. Ah. Sometimes I feel like “I need to kill myself. I need to go.” Because this country is very, very hard for me. When I see the snow and the snow falls, it makes me very, very upset. I feel like the life is empty, no one there. I know I had that feeling when I first came here because three months and I have hard times.

Given that depression which was, at least in part, compounded by the snow, Nyanath describes being especially appreciative of the communication she received from one Catholic Social Services worker about how to live in the Nebraska winters:

We came in the 20<sup>th</sup>, December 20<sup>th</sup>, so it has, become cold and this we don’t know. So, there is a lady that worked there that helped me like “you need to buy some under your clothes from --, you need to wear like certain shoes. If you didn’t use that you can fell down.” Of course I fell down in the, really, fell down when we come here. So, this, the thing is, it is look like what people are very helpful. And I cannot ask anyone, like, I didn’t know there are even some clothes you can wear inside, because we never wore pants back in our country. So, I really appreciate her help. Not for me, but for my kids.

Snow may have been an unexpected part of the physical environment, but it was not the only element of life in the United States that differed from the experiences of refugees in their home country. Social practices and holidays are different as well. Sara (Female, Sudan) described the shock her family experienced at their first Fourth of July in the United States:

And then I think during the 4<sup>th</sup> of July there were firecrackers, and we were in the house and my mom didn't know what it was. She thought it was gunfire. She was just like overwhelmed, and sad. She was like, "not here, not in this country too." When you hear that back home, that means that there's trouble coming to the village and you probably want to leave there. So we stayed in the house for a lot of days.

It was not until a case worker from one of the nonprofit agencies came to Sara's house and explained, "that it was just firecrackers and that they do that for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July" that Sara's family felt comfortable leaving the house. Thus, information and education about social celebrations and holidays from organizational workers was both needed and appreciated.

However, not all of the cultural information shared was quite so dramatic. Anai (Male, Sudan), who chose to attend college in the United States after his arrival, described how at Community Action Partnership, there were some college-aged student volunteers that:

would talk to me about how school was like here, because it is totally different.

Like the schooling is different, you know. Like the way students behave in class

or after class is totally different. Or your professors or teachers are totally different. So, they would, you know, tell us how it is like, how you can handle something that is total out of your comfort zone. Or, yeah, how you can make friends. Yeah. So that was really helpful.

When asked for an example, Anai elaborated on how he had to learn that criticism in U. S. schools is often more public (for instance an instructor would tell him an answer was wrong in front of the class), and that he would have reacted very poorly in class if he had not gotten that information in advance. In the end, then, refugees deeply relied on and valued practical and cultural knowledge from organizational staff about how to live in the United States.

### **Barriers to the Communication of Knowledge**

This communication of knowledge by organizational staff was not, however, always a smooth process. Refugee-participants described knowledge transmission as being impeded both by language barriers and by the workers' occasional lack of cultural competence.

First, multiple refugee respondents spoke of the problems caused by the lack of organizational workers who spoke the refugee's native language. For instance, Nyanath (Female, Sudan) explained:

They didn't give us a person who speak our language. So that's a problem. We have, I think, I don't know where he's [the Catholic Social Services Case Worker] from but he speak English, but his English is very difficult for me to



understand...I don't know how we did it. He took us like every place, to get our social security, check-ups. Just, I don't know how we communicate.

Sara (Female, Sudan) confirms this problem when she said that upon first arriving in the United States, her family had trouble talking with their case workers from both agencies. She said, "we have an interpreter problem because we didn't learn English at-, especially my mom." Furthermore, even when refugees spoke English, they often had initially learned British English in foreign schools, universities or refugee camps. As Omar (Male, Sudan) indicated, "Verbal communication has been normal although with some difficulty because of the differences between the American and British English."

This lack of language compatibility was compounded at times by the desire of some refugees to save face by pretending to understand what was being communicated to them. Anai (Male, Sudan), explained:

I think that the only thing they need to hear is that, you know, make sure like, when you talk to somebody that doesn't know or doesn't understand well what you are saying, make sure – 'cause you know, some people are, I don't know. . . Some people will say yes to, you know, to when they have no clue what's going on.

Anai indicated that when refugees he knew often said "yes" or nodded when organizational workers spoke, not to indicate understanding, but to be polite. This compounded the language barriers because then organizational staff failed to realize that the person with whom they were sharing knowledge did fully understand the material shared.

Beyond the complications of language, however, refugee-participants described that information communicated by organizational staff members was also occasionally impeded by a lack of cultural competence on the part of one of the organizational workers. For instance, while Muna (Female, Afghanistan) described her communication with her own case worker at Catholic Social Services as “extremely positive,” she also described a situation in which she was asked to interact with another organizational staff member. In that situation:

I did not receive at respect for my father. And to this day I have not forgotten. But something, while he was talking and trying to explain what to do, the lady told me to tell him to stop. That’s something that would never happen, in our culture. Of course he was talking to me so I could translate through me, and maybe it would take a little longer you know to. I know that in this culture most young folks think that they ruled the world and that the older generation has had their time and it is passed, and they call their father old man, which is a very disrespectful way of addressing your father in our culture, or I would say most Middle East, most other countries outside of Western Europe.

Though to the hurried American staff worker, asking a woman to ask her aging father to stop talking may not seem to be a large affront, Muna described again and again throughout the interview how this moment really hurt her and her father and made her wary of communicating with the organizational staff in the future. As a result, when asked if she had advice for improving the communication of organizational staff with refugee-clients, Muna explained “Number one is culture appreciation... there are some

unwritten cultural standards that are in these different cultures that would be useful to know. And, so cultural competency would be one.”Overall then, though knowledge transmission was often deeply appreciated by refugee-participants, that transmission was often complicated by language and cultural barriers.

### **Whose expertise? A Desire to be Listened To**

At the same time that refugees appreciated knowledge transmitted by organizational staff, refugees expressed that understanding the value of that knowledge required a more complex understanding of expertise. Particularly, refugees saw knowledge and expertise in more complicated, tensional ways. While American organizational staff members may be experts at life in the United States, refugees expressed a sense that they also needed to be solicited for their expertise, particularly as they share how that knowledge fits their unique personal experiences and context. For instance, Anai (Male, Sudan) explained that he often felt frustrated when organizational staff members tried to tell him what to do without listening to what he really needed given his particular background. He argued, “if you can’t listen to your audience, that’s, or your clients, you’re not going to be able to help them. So, that’s one of the things I’ve seen that, you know, some organizations are not doing.” When asked what the organizational staff needed to be doing differently, Anai continued, “Well, I think one of the skills they should work on is to be good listeners, receive people, listen to what they are saying.” Similarly, Sittina (Female, Sudan) explained that organizational workers would provide her with expert information about how to conduct a job search, but would not listen when she explained that having young children at home was keeping her from

working the hours they thought she ought to. She said, “They need to listen. They need to understand that I can’t find a job just because they say I should.” This sense that organizational workers often positioned themselves as experts and “ordered” refugees to comply without regard for refugees’ personal circumstances is more fully described under the second theme, tensions of empowerment and control.

On the opposite side, refugee-participants described the most effective organizational staff members as those who genuinely sought to understand the refugees’ unique experiences and challenges. For instance, Amare, (Male, Ethiopia) explained:

She was very motherly in her approach. She was very concerned, soft speaking, and she listens a lot and that is very good when you are facing a challenge, you want to speak it to someone who listens to you, who really cares. And that’s the kind of person she is. We talked and talked and talked about our challenge and you know, listened. And then she thinks what she can do, where resources are available. She tries to connect things, and that is what I liked about her communication style.

In this instance, Amare appreciated his organizational case worker from Community Action Partnership specifically because she first listened to the experiences of Amare and his family and then sought to ensure that the knowledge she communicated was appropriate for his particular experiences and circumstances. In that, she valued his expertise over hers alone.

### **Experiential Expertise Beyond Expert Staff**

Because of this sense that the refugees themselves would bring unique expertise about how life in the United States affected them differently than it might the American workers, several refugees described a desire for organizations to facilitate communication with other refugees. These conversations would allow them to garner peer expertise rather than staff expertise when it came to knowledge about living in the United States. For instance, Amare (Male, Ethiopia) explained that he wished that Community Action Partnership would start:

group discussions with other people, similar kind of people, sharing experiences, how people manage to pass those challenging moments in their lives, etc. That would help I would say. Listening or learning from people who really experienced those challenges would be helpful. So if they would facilitate those kinds of things, those kinds of things, it might help.

This desire to learn from the experiences of refugees who had already experienced the challenges of resettling in the United States was echoed by Zhara (Female, Iran) who furthered that when she resettled in the United States, “We tried to find people here like as friends to hang out with. So that was maybe more helpful than, because you know it’s kind of hard to, yet I think that we mostly of learn things by just being around people, not really from the organization.” Zhara continued that other Iranian refugees were able to tell her more about how to deal with the unique legal situation of being a refugee from Iran (given that the United States has no embassy in Iran, for example), than organizational workers were able to. When asked why “expert” communication from

other refugees was more valuable than “expert” communication from organizational staff, Amare (Male, Ethiopia) clarified:

Yeah, it’s different. Like if you are an expert, you’re telling me because you get paid for your job. And it’s your job. Maybe you are passionate about it and maybe you aren’t. But if you are a person like myself, you’re telling me your life. You have experienced it. You’ve gone through poverty. You’ve gone through health challenges. So there are some practical strategies that they designed through going through those challenges. As an expert, I have no way to experience those. I might have heard from other people, other clients, etc. etc. Got some theoretical back up from my education. You know, living is a different thing. So, [we refugees] just believe this better.

Thus, the tension surrounding knowledge and expertise persists because while refugees want and appreciate knowledge transmission from organizational staff about how to acquire goods and services and how to adjust to cultural life in the United States, those knowledge transmissions are complicated by language differences and cultural incompetencies. Moreover, refugee-participants expressed a sense that the organizational staff persons’ positioning as the sole “expert” on life in the United States was problematic. Refugee-participants described a sense that they also needed to be listened to as experts on their own lives and circumstances. Refugee-participants expressed a desire for more communication with and from other refugees and to allow them to use their experiential expertise to meaningfully contextualize the knowledge received in communication with organizational staff.

### **Empowerment and Control**

Second, in their accounts of communication with organizational staff members in refugee resettlement organizations, the refugee-participants in my study frequently continued their stories by describing a tension they felt between what they saw as empowerment programs which functioned in controlling ways. The refugee-participants in my study depicted a strong appreciation for the ways in which communication from organizational staff at Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership allowed them a chance to start over in the United States (often from nothing), and gave them a chance to learn, achieve their goals and ultimately become self-sufficient. Simultaneously, however, many participants perceived the mechanisms through which the empowerment was to occur as complex, confusing and filled with unfair rules, bureaucracy and control. Further, several refugees perceived the organizational definitions of what it means to be empowered as inconsistent with their own understandings of empowerment. Ultimately then, refugees wondered how to become independent while being told exactly what being independent means and exactly how self-sufficiencies must be achieved.

### **Acknowledging the Need for Empowerment**

First, the refugees I spoke with all acknowledged that one of the primary goals of both Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership are to provide paths to empowerment for the refugees they serve. For instance, the Catholic Social Services checklist that guides the conversations between case workers and refugee-clients indicates that one of the jobs of the case workers is to “explain the goal of the

resettlement program – that is to help the refugee family achieve self-sufficiency through the provision of and referral to appropriate services and the attainment of fulltime employment for all employable refugees in the family” (CSS Checklist, 2011). While this checklist uses the frame of self-sufficiency, the Community Action Partnership’s Center for Refugees and Immigrants brochure uses the language of self-reliance when it discusses empowerment, stating, “We provide services that are aimed at helping refugees and immigrants build the skills that will enable them to reach their employment potential and ultimately achieve self-reliance” (CAP CRI Brochure, 2011). In both cases, these organizational documents extol the empowering benefits of such self-support. The Catholic Social Services checklist asks case workers to “Describe [to refugees]... the sense of self-esteem that comes with supporting oneself and family through employment” (CSS Checklist, 2011). Similarly, Community Action Partnership’s 2010 Annual Report explains:

The adults we serve have the ability to provide for themselves and their families. They have greater self-confidence, increased knowledge and skills, and can manage temporary setbacks and focus on long-term solutions. Their living conditions are improved, they are building and strengthening personal support systems, and they own a stake in their community. (CAP Annual Report, 2010)

The refugees I spoke with affirmed these sentiments by describing that when they moved to the United States, they needed more than just the free goods or services described above. Rather, the refugees explained that they needed to be empowered to provide for themselves after that temporary aid was no longer available. For instance, Muna,



(Female, Afghanistan) explained that she and her other female Afghani refugee friends were not taught to drive in their home country. As a result, learning to drive was essential to survival after the three months of public assistance refugees receive is up. She explains:

I will give you an example of how difficult it is to survive. Imagine someone, to ask someone after three months, you're on your own. We can't help you. You should know how to drive, how to get a car, and how to get car insurance. And that, impossible. First how to learn if you don't have a car, how do you learn? And you have to come up with some money, to get a car. And then that is not even enough. You have to have insurance on top of that which cost money. But if you are living in Nebraska, and anywhere that you go, because we don't have a bus transit system... These are the things that people don't think and because everybody else by the time their 18 years old, they already know how to drive, they have a car a family car, but for these women this is really, really hard.

Helping these women learn to drive, then, and helping them to buy and insure cars was key to giving them the independence that they needed to fully live in the United States.

Additionally, Ibrahim (Male, Sudan) argued that in his experience, many of his fellow Sudanese refugees enter the United States with a sense of entitlement fostered by the difficulties of their previous lives. Given the abuse and torture they experience, and given the opulence the United States appears to have in television shows and movies, many expect the United States to hand them material comforts. For instance, Ibrahim indicates:

One of the refugees whom I've just received and I put her in her own accommodation, and she is fine and everything. She asked "Where is my car?" "Where are the papers of the house? The house should be mine, not to pay the rent." And this is the same thing I know when I was coming back from the airport, that you will get a car. And then they will be upset, and there's stress. You have to work here to get money; you have to get the person to do something because otherwise you won't get anything. Nowhere in this world you can get something without, unless people help people who want to improve themselves.

Thus, Ibrahim explains that organizations like Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership have to help disabuse refugees of these false expectations and help them to empower themselves. He said, "You don't help people that don't want to improve themselves as you will not be able to continue helping him. Also, you have to teach them how to stand on themselves." But, if the organizations are able to help empower the refugees to be self-sufficient, Ibrahim argues that refugees will make positive and meaningful contributions to American life, saying, "So, if doors are opened for them to, to read and to carry on with their studies, to be given chances, for their children to be given chances, to play ball or soccer, then they will get out there and share with people." Overall, then, it seems that among the refugees I spoke to, the refugee-participants desired communication from the refugee resettlement organizations which would help them become empowered.

### **Communicating to Empower towards Self-Sufficiency**

Not only did the refugee-participants in my study see a need for their own empowerment when they moved to the United States, many of them described both Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership as organizations that did seek to empower them to self-sufficiency through participative partnerships and joint-planning processes. For instance, Amare (Male, Ethiopia) described how his family and his case worker from Community Action Partnership:

planned together. We did a plan together. So, the plan was what was our top priority needs for us, for the family. Like a job for my wife. Language skills for my wife. Computer skills for my wife. And school for my daughters. Some language help for my daughters. The English as a Second Language program, they were going to the English as a Second Language program and they needed some support. So we did a plan together, she had a form for that. And then, she took a copy, and whose responsibility is this and what is she going to do about item number 1, and whose responsibility was item number 2? What was our responsibility and what was her responsibility? It was mentioned in the plan of action, and then she gave a copy of that to us and she took one with her. And with that, she followed up and kept sending us some information about school, language school and about jobs and that was good.

As Amare explains, one of the primary tools used by Community Action Partnership is the Family Assessment Tool. This tool is actually a series of worksheets which ask families, in conjunction with their case worker, to evaluate their current lives on 21 dimensions, including financial resources, childcare, education, career development and

others. Then, once the family has evaluated their own lives, they prioritize which categories need to be addressed on an emergency, short term and long term basis. Finally, with the help of their case worker, they determine who should be responsible for improving each dimension and in what ways that person is responsible. Use of this Family Assessment Tool has been shown by social work scholars to result in significant positive changes for participants in the following areas: adequate housing, resources for food and clothing, understanding and acknowledging substance abuse for a significant other in the family, career planning and readiness for work (Stokes & Brasch, 1997). When asked for examples of things that became the refugee's responsibility, Amare elaborates that "she told us a couple of places for free stuff, free food and free medical stuff, and those information. So following that information and going to those places and getting the service was also my, our responsibility." Thus, while the provision of information was the organizational worker's responsibility, acting on that information was the refugee's responsibility. Furthermore, this assessment tool was used to help Amare's wife identify what she needed to be able to work in the United States. Amare explains, "We were also working on my wife's work permit, there was no way that she would get a job without a work permit. So, fill out these things and you know, call and ask, you know. They told us it takes three months, but if you follow up it might be shorter than that. So, I called a couple of times and she got it within a month of time." With their case worker's encouragement, Amare was able to obtain a work permit for his wife in a relatively short amount of time.

Catholic Social Services uses a similar planning process in which self-reliance goals are identified and then case workers aid the refugee in achieving those goals for him or herself. Just as Amare explained that the Community Action Partnership planning process surrounding education emphasized to him that “helping the kids with their language at home was my responsibility,” the Catholic Social Services checklist for refugees indicates that case workers need to explain the “parents need to check their child’s homework and attend meetings with teachers.”

Helping refugees to find work was often identified as one of the primary self-sufficiency goals as a result of the family planning sessions. Nyanath (Female, Sudan) explains that finding a job would have been nearly impossible without the collaboration of her Catholic Social Services case worker. Nyanath explains:

And, I don’t know speak English. I go like one place, they um, they have some people there taking you on a job-. I’ve seen you go to the mall, and they give you some test to put things together, because I think that we could do something like put, I don’t know what it was, small things together and they give you a certain time. And, the man told me “you have 15 minutes.” At that time I didn’t know the difference between 15 and 50. And I thought it was 50. So I start work slowly. The three, the two other working very fast. I know how to do it but I fix, I take my time. After 15 minutes I didn’t do anything. I just started putting everything and the time’s over. So I really came upset about it ‘cause I didn’t know the difference between 15 and - , so I lose that job. So, we go around and find another job. Very hard for me to get a job... So, Catholic Service took me to the electric company

\_\_name\_\_, and they have some testing in English, application in English you need to fill out in that way. So, the person who took me, he helped me a lot with that, so I got a job.

Thus, through this family planning process, empowerment needs are identified, and then with the help of the case worker, those needs are filled by the refugee him or herself. As Amare explains, the case worker “didn’t push it very hard, but we still felt kind of responsible for that. When she worked for us like this, how come we don’t work for us?” Thus, the partnership with and the provision of information and services by organizational staff encouraged refugees to become more self-sufficient.

### **Communicating to Empower to Help Others**

Beyond simply empowering refugees to help themselves, the refugees I interviewed believed that one of the most empowering things Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership did was to give them the skills and tools to help other refugees in their communities. For instance, Anai (Male, Sudan), explained:

I talked to one lady, I couldn’t recall her name, and, she was, she trying to help me be a part of help at Lincoln Action Program, like be an interpreter and I took that test...she talked to me about how that would be really helpful to the organization ‘cause if the people who do not speak English, I can be there you know, either on the phone or in person, or if people need to go see a doctors or even some courts, or something, I could go help them out or something.

Anai furthered that he really enjoyed that process, because it felt good to be able to help others. He said, “I’ve been communicating with them, answering questions if they have

questions. If they need me to help ‘em you know translate or interpret something I would be able to do it when I have time. So, it’s just really, a good feeling to be able to help other people.” Similarly, Ibrahim (Male, Sudan) described becoming involved as a volunteer for Community Action Partnership’s Center for Refugees and Immigrants (CRI):

I worked for Lincoln Action Program for one year and for CRI, which is immigration assistance, dealing with immigration with refugees, with their paperwork and so on and how to get nationality, the tests and so on. There’s 100 questions, and I have to teach people to answer it even if they don’t know English, so we have to teach them a little English so they know something, even if they don’t understand the questions, they have to know English to be citizens. This is the most important thing.

Ibrahim also indicated that he was still involved in volunteering because he enjoyed being able to help other refugees become self-sufficient too. This was particularly meaningful to some refugees because they understood that American translators, while competent in language, might not have the perspective (or experiential expertise, see previous section) to know what to really ask refugees in a situation to help them out. Muna (Female, Afghanistan) explains, “I know there was all sorts of paper work to fill out, when I went to get my driver’s license, the paperwork was in English. They [refugees] don’t know how to read that. And then the [translators] who help them, they don’t know enough to ask the questions that you need to know.” Thus, Muna began volunteering as an English translator for other Afghani women refugees at the

encouragement of her Catholic Social Services case worker. In the end, the refugees acknowledged their own need for empowerment, and appreciated the efforts of organizational staff to communicate with them in ways that allowed them to empower themselves and others.

### **Empowerment's Multiple and Conflicting Meanings**

However, while both the agencies and the refugees saw “empowerment” as a desirable goal, exactly what it means to be empowered was contested and tensional terrain. Though the goal of the Family Assessment Tool and similar processes is to identify empowerment tasks the refugee can complete him or herself, simply completing the questionnaire and telling the refugee to go out and achieve something (like get a job) does not mean that the refugee has the tools to do it. For instance, Anai (Male, Sudan) explains, “But leaving ‘em, just giving ‘em an assignment and not knowing what’s going on is not going to help at all.” When asked to elaborate, Anai clarified that his case worker often told him that he could go do something on his own, and then was resistant or angry when Anai came back with questions about how to accomplish those tasks. Anai continues that his case worker needed to help refugees:

through whatever they don’t know because coming here is like totally different, like, you have to learn a lot of things over again, or things that you have never learned. So, have them go through that, knowing what they’re doing, and you know, making sure they’re ready to be on their own, without, you know, without your help. Or, maybe when they’re on their own, they’ll come back to you and



ask you questions, “okay, how am I going to do this?” and they’re, you know, they’re going back to fix that.

Beyond being frustrated at empowerment goals that seemed unattainable alone, other refugees described being given goals or being enrolled in programs to help them achieve their goals without their knowledge or consent. For instance, Nyanath (Female, Sudan) illustrated that her case worker chose for her getting a job over going back to school. Nyanath explains, she said “‘you just need to work by yourself’. Even they have a good program; they can help you for a year before you go to school. Because I don’t know the difference, they didn’t give me choice. The person just signed me in this [job] program. So, after three months, she asked me to go out and find a job.” Essentially, though there was a program in place that would have allowed Nyanath to take a year and go to school, her case worker chose for her to pursue a job instead and Nyanath was unable to resist because she did not know the other program existed. So, while working is empowering, being forced to work at the expense of one’s education is not from Nyanath’s perspective.

Furthermore, while working and being self-sufficient may be empowering in some ways, being forced to work under threat of penalty was not for many refugees.

Sittina (Female, Sudan) describes her experience:

As far as their requirements to find a job. They keep saying I have to find a better job or they are going to take away the money they give us – for housing, for food. They think it is so easy. I have a number of children at home and I have to be able to take care of them. This means that I have to work a third shift job or I have to find a babysitter to care for them while I work during the day. Babysitters are

expensive. Working all night doesn't allow me to spend time with the children.

The economy is not very good either which makes finding a job hard. Right now I work... [but] the job does not offer me enough hours so [Catholic] Services says I must find a job or benefits could be removed.

In this case, Sittina experiences this tension between empowerment and control as a double bind. If she complies with Catholic Social Services rules to get a full time job (which will likely not pay well, given the economy), she will be away from her children and will have to pay for expensive daycare, but she will keep her food and housing assistance. If she keeps her part time job, she will be able to care for her children and not pay for daycare, but will lose her food and housing assistance. Either way, she does not have enough money to truly be independent.

This sense of disconnect between empowerment through work and empowerment to meaningfully care for family was echoed by other female refugees I spoke with. Muna (Female, Afghanistan) elaborates, "I've been talking to many people that this is one thing that we need it because you know for the widows. They are the only ones that work, they go to school, they provide for their families, they take care of the clothes and washing dishes, and they don't have much time to spend with their children." Thus, while pushing job acquisition may get refugees off public assistance faster, it does not fully empower them to live meaningful lives.

As a result, some refugees described resisting the agencies' definitions of empowerment by purposely selecting lower-tier jobs (and not striving to reach their full workplace potential) in order to prioritize their families. Ibrahim (Male, Sudan) indicates,

“I know people who are very high standard people somewhere in Sudan or in Egypt, but when I came here I found that they had just closed themselves into some small job which is not really a job even, just to pay the bills and so on and that’s it.” When asked why a refugee might do that, Muna elaborated:

Ask any refugees, or immigrants, ask them “why did you come here?” the first thing that will come out of their mouths “is for my children. I don’t have a future. They can have a future.” And most of the migrants had professional jobs, they were doctors or engineers, or you know teachers. They leave that behind because they can, also the refugee population, I don’t know anyone who has gone into pursuit of what they were before, because there is just no time. Either you provide for your family or go for your own future. So they’ve had a good life you know and identity back home but they give that all love to come here and then for their children.

While working in a job much lower than their personal intelligence and training would have gotten them in their home country may be very disempowering from the perspective of the nonprofit agency workers, Muna explains that the female Afghani refugees she knows purposefully seek to empower their children by working lower end jobs which allow them more time for their families. This different familial definition of empowerment was not fully embraced by the nonprofit organizational workers from the perspectives of the refugees I interviewed.

### **Empowerment Process Overly Controlled/Controlling**

**Strict Rules.** Beyond the multiple, and at times conflicting definitions of empowerment present between organizational workers and refugee-clients, the refugee-clients explained that the processes through which organizational staff sought to empower the refugees were often contradictory due to their overly controlled and controlling nature. Initially, the refugee-participants in my study often described that the processes designed to help empower them were dominated by strict rules which actually made it more difficult for refugees to become self-sufficient. For instance, Anai (Male, Sudan) describes one time he went into Community Action Partnership to ask a question about his citizenship paperwork, saying:

So, I went there and the guy that I, you know, I was referred to didn't help me much. He told me straight forward, "you're not my client, I can't help you"... I'm like "come on," you know, "you're here to help. So, all I need is you can, you know, send it to those people because I already fill it out. All you can do is go through it, look at it, if I'm missing something show me this is, this part should be there, yeah." So, it's like, "well, I can't, I can't help." So, that was the one part that I, wasn't helpful at all.

In this situation, Anai perceived that the man who could have helped him did not only because Anai was not "his client," forcing Anai to wait for his own case worker even though the other case worker could have easily helped him out.

But, even when refugees attempted to correctly fill out paperwork with their own case workers, strict and inflexible rules often poorly understood by the refugee created problems for empowerment. In one instance, Nyanath depicts going without much

needed Medicaid and food stamp assistance because she failed to bring in the correct number of canceled pay stubs when she filled out the paperwork. She explains:

Like, on food stamps and Medicaid gives me, like, for two months I'm really suffering about where to find food, where to go for the hospital. Because she [the Catholic Social Services worker] asked me to bring like pay stubs, so I take like only one because I get the same check, like every two weeks I get the same check. I think the one is enough. So, she didn't tell me you have to bring like, for the whole three months. She just said, for my understanding, one is enough, because I get the same hours and the same – she didn't tell me that. She said, okay, "We cut the food stamp because she didn't offer all the requirements for the paper." And, I don't know how to read English at that time. So, I say, okay, you didn't give us food stamps, what can we do?

Nyanath explains that rather than asking her to go home and get the remaining pay stubs, the organizational worker strictly followed the rules and cut her off from benefits for two months until she could reapply. After a similar situation involving housing assistance, Sittina (Female, Sudan) summarized, "Yes, [Catholic] Services does not understand what I need. They have rules and they follow them without understanding the situation."

This sense that strict rules and procedures were enforced without thought to how they might affect refugees was anecdotally confirmed by a sign on the front door of the Catholic Social Services building that a refugee pointed out to me when I arrived at the building to do an observation on May 10, 2011. The sign read "Emergency Services by Appointment Only. No Emergency Services on Wednesday." Though the intent of the

sign may be good (as it is hard to help swarms of people without appointments), the idea that one can schedule an emergency far enough in advance to make an appointment (or even more absurdly, to assume that emergencies do not happen on Wednesdays) would be naive at best. Thus, to the refugee-participants, such rules seemed like overly harsh and arbitrary limitations on empowerment possibilities.

At times, the strict rules were inconsistently explained or applied, complicating matters further. Amare (Male, Ethiopia) explained that his personal advocate (case worker) at Community Action Partnership promised him services that were then denied when he called the organization's main secretarial staff:

The secretaries, I tried a couple of times with the secretaries, they are busy so they don't treat you like your advocate does. I remember I called to ask about the rent thing, she told me that it was kind of impossible, the secretary. I don't remember exactly, but she told me a set of criteria, and unless you meet these, it is kind of impossible. I was kind of discouraged. My advocate, our advocate told me that there is room, but this secretary told me it was not possible.

This sense that rules were enforced by some but not by all organizational workers hindered the ability of refugees to feel empowered through their interactions with organizational staff.

The strict rules, finally, served to dehumanize the organizational staff person in the eyes of at least one refugee. Muna (Female, Afghanistan) explained:

I know in society you have to set up some rules and follow them. But I think that for some of them, you take the intelligence of the human away, and then anybody

can do that, I could stand there in front of the computer and stand there and it would tell me yes are eligible are no you're not. So than what's the use of having somebody there? So following the rules, it may apply to different people differently.

Ultimately, the refugees I interviewed portrayed the lack of individualized understanding and help and the emphasis on strict rules as disempowering communication forms from the organization.

**Time Limits.** Even when refugees were able to negotiate the strict rules to gain access to empowering support from these nonprofit organizations, time limits imposed on the help designed to be empowering again proved to disempower refugees. Under both Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership policies, assistance is only offered for each refugee for a limited amount of time. While there are certainly practical reasons for this limit (e.g. limited funding), refugees perceived that these limits stall their progress towards self-sufficiency. For instance, Omar (Male, Sudan) explains that both organizations “assisted me temporarily with the basic needs for the first two months before I got a job.” But as time went on, Omar argued that assistance from both Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership ended. He continues, “Many had at first been hospitable with hard wares, clothing, beddings and furniture. As time went on everybody expected me to be on my own feet, in which I began to experience the negative outcome of coming to such a place. The more I went to them the more discouragement I came back with.” Muna elaborates on the disempowering effects of

time limits when she describes the trouble faced particularly by women from Afghanistan:

Catholic Social Services... for example, you get three months of money as cash to help you with the rent. That provides three months and then after that you either lived the welfare system and or if you want to have a job or something like that automatically that help is discontinued. So that's where a lot of people are stuck. They want to move forward and they want to have a job to provide for their rent and they get some money to systems from the government. I know a lot of women who came here and they were widowed and they were all professionals, so they didn't want to stay in the welfare system but they needed that support. For instance to go to school and obviously they were the only ones providing for the family emotionally and financially and at the same time they wanted to get out of that situation and that is a major, major problem.

Thus, the rapid time limit prevents refugees in general (and perhaps widows in particular) from becoming truly empowered by forcing them to pursue jobs at the expense of family and education.

**Working Down.** One of the most strictly held rules at both Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership is the need for the refugee to find a job as soon as possible. This job is seen as the cornerstone of the ability of the refugee to provide for him or herself and his or her family. For instance, Catholic Social Services' refugee checklist describes a primary goal as "the attainment of fulltime employment for all employable refugees in the family" (CSS Checklist, 2011, p. 1). However, in many



cases, the quality of that job takes backseat to the need for rapid employment. Catholic Social Services' checklist also requires caseworkers to "Explain grounds for sanctioning: quitting, being terminated for cause, rejecting a bonafide job offer" (CSS Checklist, 2011, p. 1). Thus, refugees can be punished (sanctioned) for quitting a job or for rejecting a job offer – limitations that are clearly not placed on the general populace. Further, as Community Action Partnership's Employment Participation Rules explain "Clients must have a legitimate reason to refuse or resign from a job." While at first glance this seems quite reasonable, "legitimate reasons" are defined as " (a) earning less than minimum wage, (b) transportation issues, (c) child care issues or (d) unsafe working conditions" (Employment Participation Rules/Regulations, 2011). What is notably absent from the list is the "legitimate reasons" of being underemployed, or of working down (in terms of pay or prestige) from the jobs you are accustomed to doing. This, however, is frequently the experience of refugees in the United States. Omar (Male, Sudan) vented in frustration, "I wonder why illegal immigrants are interested in coming to America, the life of which is measured by its standards where a qualified doctor elsewhere is made a medical attendant or a caregiver, a qualified teacher is made a teacher assistant or a baby sitter of a preschool grade, to mention a few." When asked why, he explained that most refugees flee their home countries with nothing, and if they are able to grab anything, getting their high school or college diplomas or transcripts is typically not high on the list. However, since many refugees cannot return to their home countries (or even communicate with people in their home countries) without fear of violence against themselves or their families, accessing those credentials once in the United States is very difficult. Further,

even if they can be accessed, credentials are not universally transferable. Just because one was a practicing lawyer or doctor in one's home nation does not mean that the American ABA or AMA will credential one here. As a result, Omar explained, "on my part, I have been inconsiderately reduced from an intermediate school teacher and administrator to aircraft cleaner, diaper changer, and night watchman-a very degrading and stressful circumstances after having enjoyed my profession for over twenty years before coming here." This working down is compounded by programs at both Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership that pressure refugees to find work immediately (rather than encouraging them to re-enter school or study for exams to renew or recertify their credentials). Ibrahim (Male, Sudan) explains:

So, they have tried to get *any* job here, and to go into this, like if a doctor came from Africa to the United States, he would not be a doctor here unless he sits in so many exams here, and then after that, he will join. And when the doors have opened for such people to help themselves to involve themselves into the system of this country, this will be very easy. That people will feel at home and then they will share how to build the country. Because there is fear, inside fear. [Emphasis Original]

Thus Ibrahim highlights not only the pressure to get *any* job upon arrival in America, but simultaneously highlights how this practice of working down is disempowering by promoting fear in refugees rather than a sense of feeling at home. In this way, this push for work as a source of empowerment unfortunately disempowers refugees who were professionals in their home land. In the end then, while refugee-participants report

seeking and receiving empowering communication from organizational staff members, they experience tensions caused by the ways in which those empowering processes can also become strict, inflexible and controlling practices which limit their empowerment potential.

### **Rights and Power**

Third, as part of their mission to provide basic information and services to refugees and to empower refugees to become self-sufficient members of society, both Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership seek to help refugees understand the rights and freedoms they have in the United States. For instance, as part of their intake/orientation checklist, Catholic Social Services workers explain to refugees their rights, including: their legal rights as refugees, their rights to work (and to be free from job discrimination), and relevant laws regarding domestic violence and sexual harassment, (CSS Checklist, 2011). Similarly, in the Cultural Orientation Booklet provided to refugees during Cultural Orientation Sessions, Community Action Partnership indicates to refugees their legal rights regarding landlords, the courts/criminal justice system, and immigration status among others (Welcome to Nebraska Guidebook, 2011).

The refugees-participants in my study confirmed that they frequently relied on communication from organizational staff members to help them gain and understand their new rights and freedoms in the United States. In particular, many refugees emphasized new understandings of sex and gender rights in the United States. However, this knowledge was not always liberatory, as new rights and freedoms disrupted established

family dynamics between spouses and parents and their children. Further, at times the dependence of refugees on their American case workers creates a power situation in which the rights of refugees were more easily abused.

### **Communicating New Rights and Freedoms**

Initially, the refugees I interviewed consistently explained that one of the more helpful things that nonprofit workers communicated to them were their rights and freedoms in the United States. Ibrahim (Male, Sudan) explains that “when we are out there coming to the United States, there are so many questions about our rights.” First, the refugees spoke extensively about the ways in which both Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership helped them to understand their legal rights and helped them to avoid the abuse of those who might take advantage of them. For instance, Ali (Male, Iran) described that for him, one of the most difficult parts of moving to America was establishing a bank account what his rights were as a depositor in the United States. He explains:

I mean the problem I actually got into myself, when you go to the bank, bankers speak really fast because it right you just transfer is much information as they can in a time as possible, so you don't follow anything literally anything. And if you're going to give them your money, that's all you have here. You can easily get screwed or, so this really makes you worried, because you don't know what going on, you're just giving your money to someone and you don't know what happens

But, Ali continues that Community Action Partnership sent someone with him to the bank to tell him “what the bank was saying what and that way was very helpful.” In this way, the organizational volunteer helped him to understand what the relevant rules were for bank deposits and in what ways his money would be protected.

Though legal rights in terms of banking and housing were important to refugees, the single most frequently described rights that refugees described the organizational staff helping them to learn were new rights and freedoms between the sexes in the United States. For instance, Ibrahim (Male, Sudan) explains the mentality that many refugees enter the United States with:

You know women, the first thing any woman who comes from Africa, that comes from, I’ll give you an example, from Vietnam, they believe that the husband is everything. So, he thinks for them, brings money, brings everything, the husband is everything. The wife at home is just to look after the house and so on. And beyond that, this is something she does not do.

Though refugees from Africa or Vietnam (as in his example) may enter the United States with this perception of the appropriate relationship between the sexes, he explains that workers at Catholic Social Services quickly helped him to understand that in the United States women have rights to work, own property and live independently that were not common in his home country. As Ibrahim summarizes, “This is a change in their lives.”

Nyanath (Female, Sudan) echoes this sentiment when she explains that a woman at Catholic Social Services helped her to understand why children from the same mother in the United States might have different last names. She explains that:

A woman [in Sudan], she needs to speak with this husband even if he's bad or whatever. You just spent all your life there; you're going to have all your kids from that man. But, here you have choice. If the man is not good you can go and marry another man. So, you can have children with different last names.

In this instance, though Nyanath tells me that she has a good husband, she appreciates the rights women have to leave an abusive husband and marry another man in the United States. Ibrahim concludes that after communicating with organizational staff members through the resettlement process, "you will find that in a couple or two years, the refugees will know their rights, they will know they have right to do whatever they want to do."

Not only were organizational staff on hand to help refugees proactively understand their rights, organizational staff helped refugees protect those rights by helping them to combat abuse. Nyanath tells of one instance in which she was being taken advantage of by a telemarketer:

I had trouble with the - . They call me on the phone, I think some company offered me like, "we're going to give you free minutes to talk to like your country." So, I don't know that because I don't know that there is cards you can buy. And I say "Okay." And I call because my husband was in Kenya at that time. So, I talk with him maybe ten minutes and then the line is cut off. So after one week I get a bill that is maybe \$300. I didn't speak it, but because I tried the line like two times. I called them and said "I need help." I didn't know where to go. Because I didn't speak English. So, I took this bill to Lincoln Action Program and

a guy from Sudan was there. He called them.”Stop your service. We don’t know this service.” Because, some companies take advantage of refugees who come to the United States. So, he helped me a lot.

Nyanath was not the only refugee who went to either Catholic Social Services or Community Action Partnership with a legal question or concern. Zhara (Female, Iran) explains that when she enrolled in a checking account at her bank, the bank set up an automatic transfer from her checking account to a savings account each month without telling her about the process. This created real problems for her:

They were transferring like \$25.00 from my checking to my savings account every month. And I wasn’t, I think they just started working at that time or something and I didn’t have that much money. And I didn’t have any credit cards. So I went to the mall and I bought something I guess and it was I don’t know how much and they transferred, I think it was \$30.00, no, it was \$10.00, and I had \$25.00 and my account. So I spent \$10.00 and I was left with 15, and they transferred \$25.00 from this to that. And I was left with -\$10. And they charged me \$40.00 because I was left with -\$10.

Zhara explains that she was able to go back with a staff member from Catholic Social Services, who explained the miscommunication to the bank, and “they were nice and they were able to take [the charges] away.” To her, this help was critical because “the most of the time what we encounter is that we don’t know the rules and they think that we do know, because you do know that if you’ve had an account in there so many years, you should know but I don’t know.”

Ali (Male, Iran) agrees when he explained that he was thankful that Community Action Partnership had “a lawyer and they [refugees] can call him at any time they want or any problem they get into.” In that way, continued communication with legal staff from these nonprofit organizations helped refugees understand and retain their rights.

### **The Downsides of “Freedoms”**

While gaining a fuller understanding of their new rights and freedoms in the United States was appreciated by the refugees I interviewed, these new freedoms were not problem-free. In fact, some of these new freedoms communicated to refugees and their families disrupted long standing family dynamics in problematic ways. For example, Ibrahim continued his discussion of sex/gender parity in the United States by explaining that while some women greatly benefited themselves and their families with their new understandings of freedom:

Other women thought it in a wrong way. They thought that it was a freedom to play. And you are a wife; it is time for you to get free from your husband. When you comes to the United States, she gets a job. She keeps her checks for herself. She doesn't pay for anything in the house. She sends money back home for her Mother or her Father and she doesn't help her husband in the house because it is his right to do everything in the house. But, due to the situation, she needs to help him and he needs her help. So, he will ask her to share the expenses of the house, and then problems will appear. So, many of the refugee families, there's catastrophe. Why? Because the father is not living at home with his children, why? Because of such small problems.



This sense of disruption in family dynamics caused when women misused their new freedoms was echoed by Zhara (Female, Iran) who furthered that some women she knew took advantage of domestic abuse laws they read about in Community Action Partnership documents by “calling the police and reporting abuse whenever their husbands would do something they disagreed with.” In those instances, husbands would be arrested and the court system would have to try and sort out whether actual abuse had occurred. Thus, partially understood new freedoms between the sexes resulted in problematic family disruptions for some refugees.

These disruptions also happened between parents and children in refugee families. As Muna (Female, Afghanistan) indicates, many refugee parents are used to strict cultural expectations for respect for elders. However, in the United States, many refugee children understood their new rights and freedoms to mean a different and more egalitarian relationship between parents and children. Muna bemoans this difference, saying:

I know that in this culture most young folks think that they ruled the world and that the older generation has had their time and it is passed, and they call their father old man, which is a very disrespectful way of addressing your father in our culture. Or I would say most Middle East, most other countries outside of Western Europe, I think you would see the tremendous respect for your elders. . . . But life experience and other stuff, they’ve seen the world and we absolutely have to respect that, and we do. I think one of the side effects of living in a country where kids say, “I know it all,” that’s something that I don’t know how to tell them. Right now you know nothing. Be quiet until you learn things. So that’s one

of the things that you never tell a kid, how to respect your parent. They should just know that. That you can't expect that here because the cultural, what is outside your home is very different.

Because of these disruptions, Muna explains that many of her fellow female Afghani refugees really struggle to discipline their children appropriately in the United States and that these differences in cultural expectations for respect have disrupted many of the Afghani families in the United States. Thus, while communicating new rights and freedoms to refugees in the United States can be very helpful, a tension persists in that those rights can be implemented in ways which disrupt family dynamics and cause strain on the refugees who purport to benefit from them.

Unfortunately, organizational staff members as the communicative source of information regarding refugees' rights also opened refugees up to a second form of abuse. Because refugees grew to rely on staff members for information about what they could and couldn't do in the United States, a power-laden relationship developed in which some organizational staff were able to abuse the rights of the refugees they served. For instance, Nyanath (Female, Sudan) explains that as one particular volunteer for Catholic Social Services was in her home, he began to sexually abuse her and her child. He would "try to touch me or try to take my daughter." In one particular instance:

[The volunteer said,] "Oh yeah, I'll take your kids to the movies" and when he came he said "no, I need to take your little only." She's about 15 years at that time. And I say "No. You need to take them, take all of them" because I have six boys and one girl. At that time I had five boys and my daughter.

Nyanath explained that while she felt that this volunteer's advances were wrong, the expected relationships between the sexes were so different in the United States than in her home nation that "I think it is just the way American people act, because I was confused, really, at that time." When I continued to ask whether she reported the man, Nyanath repeated, "I didn't know. I think this is the way that American people are." As a result, she continues, "I didn't really pay him attention for anything. I just, like if he asked me if I need help or anything I say 'No! I'm Okay!' because I don't really want to interact with him. So, we survived, along with my kids." Thus, while Nyanath tried to protect herself and her children by refusing this volunteer's help, she was still subject to his advances. In this way, not only was she suffering sexual harassment, she also may have missed out on other rights or services she might have accepted from a different volunteer.

Of course, not all instances of abuse were so dramatic. Muna (Female, Afghanistan) recounts that after her time working with a different volunteer from Catholic Social Services, she learned from other refugees that he did not provide her with information regarding all of the services from which she could have benefited. She explains:

There was another service that we could have had and would have helped a lot, and because to this date I can't think why he didn't tell me that. I found that out myself and we got enrolled in everything, but that was later in the years. But one I would call him and ask for help and something like that, but he did not share that

one thing that he knew that I could have used at the time of financial crunch that we were in.

Though Muna admits that she does not know for sure why this volunteer failed to tell her about a particular financial service she needed, she speculates that it may have been “because she was a woman.” In her mind, her more vulnerable position as a single woman from Afghanistan may have led him to believe that he could save money by not telling her of the service. Though this may not be the case, whatever his motivation, her reliance on communication from Catholic Social Services volunteers meant that she did not know to explore whether she had rights other than the ones he told her about, which led to her missing out on this particularly needed financial service.

Ultimately, the refugees-participants in my study confirmed that they frequently relied on communication from organizational staff members to help them gain and understand their new rights and freedoms in the United States, especially as they related to sex and gender. However, this knowledge, at times, functioned in problematic ways by disrupting established family dynamics between spouses and parents and their children. Further, at times the dependence of refugees on American organizational volunteers created a power situation in which the rights of refugees were abused. Thus communicating about rights created tensions surrounding rights, freedoms, power and responsibility.

### **Openness and Closedness**

Fourth, refugee-participants described a tension surrounding the degree to which their communication with organizational staff at refugee resettlement organizations was

open and frank and the degree to which it was more reserved or closed. Refugees admitted that to receive help, they had to be very open in their communication with nonprofit workers about their own cultures, personal traumas, financial struggles and other experiences. Further, some of the refugees reported enjoying such openness as a site to share their culture and background with others. However, while beneficial to accessing goods and services, there was a simultaneous desire from refugees to protect their privacy due to fears of misunderstanding and discrimination.

### **Need for Open Communication**

Initially, the refugee-participants in this study largely indicated that they understood the need for open and honest communication with the staff of Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership, as that communication helped their case workers understand their unique circumstances and provide them with the aid that they need. Amare (Male, Ethiopia) indicates that his family was very open with his case worker from Community Action Partnership, saying, “We talked about our culture, where we come from, our background, stuff like that. She was interested in our background as well. That helped us to know, helped her to know us better. You know it is kind of funny, her level of involvement.” When I asked for elaboration, he continued that he and his family told her in depth about their medical, financial and educational needs. Though Amare admits, “And from our culture, our pride, we don’t want to tell all of our problems to somebody. So, we were a little hesitant, I could say.” He also said he understood that “more important for me was that our needs were met.” As a result, he shared very personal problems with his case worker.

Anai (Male, Sudan) furthers that his family also saw the need for openness with his case worker from Catholic Social Services. Anai described that as his case worker sought to provide his family with goods and services, their communication “really opened up and we’ve had talk[s] about what’s going on and like how we moved here and what’s going on with that and how we ended up moving to [a refugee camp in] Ethiopia. So, that’s really, I feel like it’s home.”

To facilitate such open communication, many refugees described organizational workers and volunteers as asking them genuine questions about their lives and backgrounds that promoted openness and dialogue. Specifically, when asked what some organizational staff does to promote honest sharing, Ali (Male, Iran) simply said “they start asking questions.” For instance, Sara (Female, Sudan) explained that one of her favorite memories of volunteers from Catholic Social Services were of “them personally coming to my house and checking on me, and [asking] how me and my sister were doing, and how my mom was doing and stuff.” In that way, these volunteers were able to gain a better understanding of how her family was really doing.

Similarly, Ali (Male, Iran) indicated that organizational workers and volunteers were willing to ask him questions about his national and cultural background in a way that helped him to dispel stereotypes and communicate about personal lifestyle. He explained:

I have noticed that usually people think that Iran is one of those Arab countries, in that neighbor- in that Middle East area, and they know that we practice Islam. So and that’s what you see, but Iranians aren’t, I mean some of the time, but usually

we aren't, usually we are not usually covered. You know like, people drink alcohol, Iranians usually drink alcohol. So this usually raises the question that "I thought you guys don't drink? Or thought you were supposed to be covered? Or don't eat pork?" and you explain, some of the things we just don't practice.

By having a chance to explain his particular experiences with Islam, Ali found that he was able to help workers and volunteers understand better what his family life was like and what they were hoping for in the United States.

Beyond such general questions, Muna (Female, Afghanistan) explained that case workers were able to provide her family with needed psychological help because the case workers "visit at least once a year with the family" and that during those visits, the case workers were able to "ask the right questions" about how the family was doing.

Additionally, beyond just asking general questions, Muna acknowledged that such observations in the home allowed the case worker to "look at you know, eight year olds, 12 year olds, and then... kind of know that the environment is different." By observing how the children of the house acted, case workers were able to recommend her family participate in some much-needed psychological services. Virtually all of the refugees I interviewed indicated that their organizational contacts communicated with them at least periodically in their own homes. This openness of their homes to organizational staff allowed staff to see firsthand what services refugees might need.

In some instances, this openness on behalf of the refugees was matched by a reciprocal openness on behalf of the organizational worker. Amare (Male, Ethiopia) explains that his case worker from Community Action Partnership "told us about herself,

about her family, like she was divorced, she has kid and she's a single mom. Yeah, that was very good." Amare explained that learning such personal details about her made sharing his personal history easier. Overall, then, open communication between organizational staff and refugee-participants fostered relationships which led to better service provision for the refugees served.

### **Desire for Communicative Closedness**

Unfortunately, this openness was not universally beneficial. While openness was advantageous for service provision, several refugees indicated that such openness created problematic breaches of privacy and exposed refugees to culturally insensitive questioning and prompted a fear of discrimination. First, the level of open communication required from refugees by organizational staff prompted some privacy concerns. Though being open with staff from nonprofit refugee resettlement organizations was promoted as essential to successfully resettling in the United States, Amare (Male, Ethiopia) explains, "You feel bad telling all of your challenges to somebody else outside of the family." He elaborates that revealing detailed financial and medical challenges to someone outside the family was harmful to his pride, and potentially could bring judgment upon his family. Amare elaborates:

The first time I met this lady, I had this antipathy, kind of, and I was reserved in my communication. She's not like me, she looks good, you know. She's white, she's, so, if I tell her every challenge I have, how will she interpret it? Will she think I'm just stupid here, begging for resources? But I had no evidence for my side. All these things, all of these kinds of questions cross your mind at first.



Beyond the normal concerns for personal pride and cultural preferences for discreteness, however, Muna (Female, Afghanistan) furthers this concern when she says, “We actually didn’t share much. Now I am quite vocal. But back then, you are in a state of shock and, because your life changes drastically and just live day to day and forget what you had in the past, and maybe focus on the future.” Essentially, Muna argues that refugees who have experienced severe trauma in the past may prefer to not relive that trauma by recounting it to (sometimes multiple) case worker(s).

Additionally, some refugees reported that their level of openness with case workers allowed case workers to become overly involved in their private lives. For instance, Amare tells of a joke his wife decided to play on his daughter which prompted a great deal of concern:

One day my wife was joking and told my youngest daughter that in her belly there was a baby. And my younger daughter took that seriously; she took it to school and told her teacher that there was a baby in her mom’s tummy. Then the teacher told our [Community Action Partnership] advocate and these people were really concerned.”These people are in need and another baby coming, they will really be in problem. They were concerned.” The teacher, they had a party and they invited us for the kids, kind of a party and she was there, the advocate. And the teacher came to me and whispered, “Is your wife pregnant?” “No!” “Oh, okay, they told us you were” “No, it was my wife only just joking” “Oh, we took it really seriously and we were really concerned about it. I’m sure Josie [the case worker] will be very happy to hear that”

While the decision to have or not have another child would be, to many, a very personal family decision, this joke highlights how the Community Action Partnership advocate expected to not only be informed of a potential pregnancy, but to be involved in such decision making. Though this might be sensible for the agency's financial reasons, such involvement was not always a welcomed disruption of the refugees' privacy.

While open questioning was seen by some refugees as a tool to promote open dialogue, this discomfort with communicating openly about past experiences was compounded at times by culturally insensitive and culturally ignorant questions from agency staff and volunteers. For example, Anai (Male, Sudan) describes his conversation with one of the college-aged volunteers at Community Action Partnership:

So, they're trying to judge me based on what they've seen on TV. And, one of the guys, yeah, walked up to me and it like, "yeah, what really nasty food have you ever eaten when you were back at home?" I was like, "dude, can we change conversations a little bit, you know, talk about something interesting? Because what you've seen on TV is probably not what we're going to talk about. And, it's probably not realistic." And, then they change conversation.

In this case, the presumption of "nasty food" based on stereotypes perpetuated on television causes Anai to end the conversation about his background. Disappointingly, such stereotypes about the "primitiveness" of African countries appeared in multiple refugees' stories. Mamadou (Male, Senegal) explained to me that he specifically sought to dispel stereotypes by fostering dialogue with agency volunteers. He explained, "every time I have the opportunity, I try to talk to people. I remember talking this guy and he, I

was like, ‘did you know that there are more Muslims there now than there has ever been in the United States?’ those types of things.” However, Mamadou said, the male volunteer responded, “where do you live, do you live in huts?” which Mamadou found quite frustrating, because as he explained, “They would not know for example that in Nebraska there might be two, less than three million people. In the country where I come from, a couple of the cities would have more people than the entire state of Nebraska.” This assumption that he lived a primitive or backwards life in his home country was insulting at best, and conversation stopping at worst.

African refugees were not the only ones who preferred closedness in their communication with agency workers because of fear of stereotypes and discrimination. For example, Zhara (Female, Iran) indicates, “when most people hear Iranian, they think “terrorist.” The whole Middle East actually is not well known. . . You know, or even most people they don’t know for example that we speak Farsi we don’t speak Arabic.” As a result, she was not always eager to disclose to volunteers that she was from Iran. Along similar lines, Muna (Female, Afghanistan) did not always want to recount her experiences in her home country for fear of perpetuating stereotypes about life in the Middle East. She furthers, “it is not necessary for the civilizations to be on the same platform. We think that US is civilized, and Syrians would think that Syria is civilized. But, we don’t have to be talking about it.” In her mind, one way to protect those differences between what the United States might consider civilized behavior and what a predominantly Muslim nation (like Syria) might consider civilized is not to talk about those differences.

Though misinformation and culturally ignorant questions perpetuated this desire for closedness, not all hurtful questions were based on ignorance. At times, questions which may be legitimate in an American cultural context violated refugees' cultural expectations and prompted closedness as well. In one such situation, Nyanath (Female, Sudan) recalls being taken aback by a series of standard questions from a woman at Catholic Social Services who was helping her fill out paperwork. She explains:

When I came, one of the lady who took me there, she from Iraq. We speak the same language, Arabic. So, I have like seven kids, six was with me at that time. I don't know why this lady asked me but she was like "All these kids from one father?" So, maybe this question, I don't know, I realized later that this is a normal question to ask. But I became defensive. Like what is wrong she saw in me that she would ask me all these kids from one man? So, I just keep quiet. I didn't like to talk because I thought, maybe she sees something wrong. Why's she asking? I didn't even say, I just be sad about it.... I have a bad feeling about those people, why did they ask me these questions?

Nyanath explained that she later realized that it was not uncommon in the United States for a woman to have children with multiple fathers and that this woman was likely not judging her at all. But, because having children with multiple fathers would be culturally taboo in Sudan, such questioning caused Nyanath to close down her communication with this particular organizational worker. Thus, while refugees valued open communication as a way to share their experiences and to better obtain needed goods and services, at

times that openness threatened their privacy and exposed them to stereotypical and discriminatory communication.

### **Integration and Separation**

Finally, refugees explained that communication from and with organizational staff members in refugee resettlement organizations helped them connect with non-refugee Americans and build community. However, because integration often happened more quickly and more fully for children of refugees than for their adult parents, this process of integration often created generational tensions as refugees sought to negotiate family structures of integration and separation. Simultaneously, therefore, many refugees expressed a desire to maintain separation or uniqueness from non-refugee Americans and to preserve cultural practices from their homelands.

### **Communicatively Facilitating Integration**

The refugees I spoke with confirmed that one of the most difficult problems refugees face in terms of their long-term successful resettlement is their ability to integrate into non-refugee American society. Ibrahim explains, “What I’ve found is that there is so many refugees who are here in the United States who are not able to enter into the American Communities.” This is problematic for those refugees because:

Most of the refugees, they are still keeping their own traditions, and their own way of living, and they don’t open themselves in this community, which is their second country. And there’s no way that they can go back. So, I think that there are some invisible doors closed towards them because I’ve seen a lot. And something has to be done about it, you know. So, the organizations has to open

something for these refugees to feel at home, to feel that they are really Americans, instead of feeling that they are - that they can't become Americans (Ibrahim, Male, Sudan).

To Ibrahim, the isolation caused by failing to integrate into American communities limits refugees' potential and forever binds them to a homeland to which they will never return. Thus, the refugees I interviewed reported that they were very appreciative of the ways in which communication from organizational staff helped them to build connections to non-refugee Americans and generate a sense of community. For instance, Mamadou (Male, Senegal) spoke appreciatively of a program through Catholic Social Services which "would divide us into American families. And they had what they called the American volunteers. So when we would come to each table there was a host family and yeah we would talk about them and we would do many activities." Zhara (Female, Iran) also spoke appreciatively of that program and the ways in which it facilitated integration into American society, saying, "They can introduce you to a family... So I think that one of the important things we can do is to think about the ways to help people to actually integrate into American Society." According to Mamadou and Zhara, these connections fostered by Catholic Social Services gave these refugees a chance to really get to know some people outside of their own refugee community.

These social gatherings were not always directly sponsored by the nonprofit refugee resettlement agencies. In other cases, a volunteer or organizational staff member would invite a refugee and his/her family to attend social gatherings at other locations in the community. Ali (Male, Iran) told me a story of an Iranian woman he knew who felt

isolated and depressed upon coming to America. He explained that her volunteer English tutor through Community Action Partnership invited her to a church service and, “they were going to that church together with a lot of other Americans. And I mean regardless of their religion and beliefs... they would just start talking to the Americans and just chatting with them and like mingling around.” Ali said that was the “biggest help” that he knew in that Iranian woman’s life.

Zhara admits, however, that simply introducing refugees to other Americans is not enough. She explains, “It’s hard, because you can’t order for somebody to be friends with that guy {points}, they have to really feel it.” But, Zhara also acknowledges that while these nonprofit organizations cannot guarantee friendships, they can provide them the space to develop naturally. When asked to offer advice to the nonprofit organizations which assist with resettlement, Zhara said that the thing that would most help refugees “accept the culture” of the United States would be “to have for example some occasions, celebrations, you know like, whatever Martin Luther King birthday for example, just to make something up...for people to mingle around and talk, I think that would help a lot. Just an excuse for people for getting together to hang out, to find friends.” Thus, through directly connecting refugees to other American families and by indirectly providing spaces and places for refugees to make American friends, communication from nonprofit refugee resettlement organizations fostered the integration of refugees into American communities.

### **Problems of Integration**

Such integration, however, was not problem-free. In fact, because children of refugees are placed quickly into American schools, most of the refugees reported that their children learned English language skills more quickly than their parents, made American friends more easily than their parents, and adopted American cultural practices more fully than their parents. This discrepancy in integration between the refugee generations caused additional disruption to and stress on refugee family structures. As Muna (Female, Afghanistan) explains, “And then at the same time children are growing up culturally in a culture that is different than their homes and they want to be part of the outside world. And then by the time the parent or the mother realizes, it is too late.” She continued, “they realize their children do not, you know, do not respect the culture in their eyes. All the things that have value to them do not have value to their children, because they’re just raised differently and the children are stuck between two different worlds.” The stress this creates on families, according to Muna, can at times lead to verbal or physical violence between parents and children:

On top of that, you don’t know how to react, and this is documented all around the country, where the parents are being really harsh on their daughters or their sons and people don’t understand that it’s not that these parents want anything back for their children, they’ve grown up in a different culture and then they have sacrificed everything to get somewhere emotionally

Consequently, Muna argues that while it is helpful for students to get help integrating into American culture in schools, the nonprofit resettlement organizations must then help families to negotiate family communication discrepancies that result.



Furthermore, the more refugees integrate into American society, the more isolated they may feel from their own extended families and cultural histories in their home countries. Ibrahim (Male, Sudan) explains:

Well, I told you that they're not feeling that good; they're not feeling at home, so. For example, there are those who are gone here, and they're Americans, and they know the system here, but still they're keeping their own, they don't know anything back home, but still they're keeping this because of their parents and because of the behavior back at their houses.

What Ibrahim explains here is that there are refugees that do not feel at home in America, despite the fact that they know the system. But, due to lack of communication, they simultaneously do not know anything happening back in their home countries. Nevertheless, they try to persist in their home country's cultural practices to honor their parents and their traditions. In Ibrahim's view, this creates a dangerous situation in which the refugee is neither connected here nor there, but rather is isolated from both communities.

### **Fostering Separation**

Given these potential downsides to integration, some refugees sought to preserve cultural separation in the face of integration. For instance, when asked about the desire to integrate culturally, Zhara (Female, Iran) said "I think it depends on how you, for example, what you think before you come here. For example if you were very different, I have a friend who she covers [makes gesture of veil covering face], so I think maybe she had a more harder time compared to me." Though Zhara chooses not to veil her hair or

face in the United States, she acknowledges that a woman who did would have a more difficult time integrating into the dominant American culture.

Some of the refugees I interviewed, however, saw those cultural practices as important to preserve despite their potential effect on integration. Nyanath (Female, Sudan) explained that she was frustrated by employment advisors at Community Action Partnership who told her that she would struggle to find a job if she chose to wear a veil covering her hair to a job interview. She said:

So, a lot of people say that if you need to have a job, when you go there just take off your scarf[*she gestures to head*]. I don't feel comfortable taking off the scarf. I can take it off in front of you [*to me, the interviewer*] easily because you are woman. But, when you go to work, where there're men there, you going to use it. Because the scarf was an important part of Nyanath's deeply held religious practices, she was unwilling to simply take it off for the sake of workplace integration. She summarized that organizations like Community Action Partnership "need to find some way to help" her get a job and keep her veil on.

Perceived religious differences between Americans and refugee communities were often the source of desire for separation. Not only were Islamic practices mentioned, but some Christian refugees mentioned that they preferred to worship in ways similar to the ways in which they had worshiped in their home countries. Ibrahim (Male, Sudan) said, "I know some Sudanese or some Africans, they used to have their own congregations in churches...they are still keeping their own traditions, and their own way

of living, and they don't open themselves in this community." In this way, Ibrahim explained that some refugees sought to preserve their cultural distinctness.

### **Communicating Integration and Separation: Both/And**

Integration and Separation were not, however, always seen as exclusive locations. Rather, refugees reported that other organizations in the community (though notably not Catholic Social Services or Community Action Partnership) were seeking to help them integrate into the community by sharing their separate cultural identities with others. For instance, Ibrahim described cultural centers in town which hold cultural fairs and other events to help share the culture of their subgroup with the larger Nebraska community:

For example, there is an African Center, where they can do their activities there, and one of their members, who is a lady called "Amy," and we invite the Americans to come and to enjoy this traditions and these... and also there is an Asian Center. So, this will let them try to involve themselves to melt into this community.

In this way, the cultural centers help bridge integration and separation by bringing together various cultural traditions. Zhara agreed, saying that she participated in an International Fashion Show sponsored by a partnership of several of these cultural community centers. She explains:

There was a girl, she was from Pakistan, she was actually managing everything. We were like part of the team, and we were cooking our food, trying to present our culture and it was very good. It was like the first time we were really among

foreigners really interacting with them. And it really helped us to get out of the Iranian community. It was very good.

Thus again, sharing her Iranian cultural heritage with Americans helped her to “get out of the Iranian community,” creating a synthesis of integration and separation. When asked what organizations could be doing to really make meaningful connections between refugees and other non-refugee populations, Mamadou agreed, saying that nonprofit refugee resettlement organizations should “try to organize a fiesta, where we meet once a year, there is music and it is really cultural. I think they should try to have a connection between them [different peoples].” Thus, while communication with organizational staff in Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership both promoted integration and, at times, provoked separation, there appears to be a real desire for additional communication to help refugees’ bridge integration and separation in meaningful ways.

Therefore, based on the responses of the eleven refugees interviewed, there were five primary tension clusters which characterized their experiences, including: (a) tensions of knowledge and expertise, (b) tensions of empowerment and control, (c) tensions of rights and power, (d) tensions of openness and closedness and (e) tensions of integration and separation. After exploring the answers to research question two and research question three in the subsequent two chapters, I will return to these themes in my discussion in Chapter 7.

## **CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH QUESTION 2 RESULTS**

### **ORGANIZATIONAL STAFF MEMBERS' COMMUNICATIVE EXPERIENCES IN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT ORGANIZATIONS**

While the previous results chapter focused on the major communicative tensions experienced by refugee-participants in refugee resettlement organizations, Chapter 5 focuses on the communicative tensions revealed by refugee resettlement organizational staff members in their accounts of communication with the refugees they serve. Following this elucidation of emergent themes, I revisit and elaborate on these findings in Chapter 7.

My second research question asked: What tensions do workers and volunteers in mediating refugee resettlement organizations experience in their communicative interactions with refugee-participants? Based on the responses of the fifteen organizational staff participants interviewed, there were five primary tension clusters which characterized their experiences, including: (a) tensions of knowledge and expertise, (b) tensions of empowerment and bureaucracy, (c) tensions of intervention and “liberation” (d) tensions of seeking understanding and protecting privacy and (e) tensions of respecting uniqueness and needing uniformity.

#### **Knowledge and Expertise**

As I spoke with the organizational staff participants in my study, it was immediately striking that one of the primary tensions they described experiencing also centered on their positioning in terms of communicating knowledge and performing expertise. The staff I interviewed explained that they enjoyed communicating to refugees the information about life in the United States needed to make the refugees' resettlement

successful here. In fact, many of them reported that their favorite part of the job was sharing information about day to day life with those that they served. In that way, they were positioned as experts on life in the United States. However, at times that expert position was problematic for organizational staff. They reported that refugees often expected information and services that workers were not able to provide (as they are simply not experts at everything) and that this lack of knowledge when expertise was expected creates frustration and disappointment in the refugees they served. Furthermore, the usefulness of “experiential expertise” as emergent from the refugees themselves was also seen in conflicting ways.

### **Communicating Expert Information**

First, virtually every organizational staff member interviewed immediately reported that one of their primary functions as either workers or volunteers for Catholic Social Services or Community Action Partnership was to provide information to refugees about how to access basic goods and services in the United States. Kim (CSS) began by explaining that when a new refugee enters the United States, Catholic Social Services seeks to ensure that the refugees “get a house and they get everything furnished, not well, but stuff and they get food supplies and they just get everything, medical care and all of that stuff.” Heather (CAP) similarly indicates that Community Action Partnership has “a family service coordinator that works with families too, [and] she works with them on budgeting and helping with rent and utilities, different things like that.” Angela (CAP) continues that through Community Action Partnership’s educational programs for children, enrolled children each get “a medical exam, dental exam, vision screening,

immunizations.” As a result, her job involves “a lot of communication about the parent’s roles and responsibilities to get those done. . . so we get them making sure the kids are healthy, and then involving the parents in that process.” To help refugees find work, Lisa (CAP) describes how Community Action Partnership “pair[s] them with people in their field and they, they would job shadow and they would get like networking, like the best thing was that they would find out where they needed to go.” Thus, in many ways, a great deal of what organizational staff members in these organizations do is provide expert information about how to obtain goods and access basic services for refugees which help them begin a new life in the United States.

This communication from organizational staff to refugees is often quite intensive because so many refugees enter the United States without knowledge of many goods and services that seem “obvious” to longer-term American residents. James (CAP) explains:

You can ask, [all] the resettlement agencies will tell you, those first two months that somebody’s here, there’s a lot of hand holding. This is how the microwave works. This is how the refrigerator works. You have to put meat in the refrigerator. You’ve got to lock your door at night. This is how you buy a car.

This is what to avoid if you buy a car. And those, I think, are so intensive.

To offer a more detailed example, Jason (CSS) described one of the Burundian refugees that he worked with who had been living in a refugee camp in Tanzania for more than twenty years before he moved to the United States. Jason tells of one time when he took the man to a grocery store and realized that:

He just didn't have any concept of going to a store or, you know, buying a single apple. Or maybe it's better to buy a 5 pound bag because it is so much cheaper.

Some things are in season, and some are not...I think it was just like the truck came up and that's what you eat. It's like a whole different, you know.

Essentially, Jason realizes that in the refugee camp in Tanzania, this man likely had to eat (when food was available) whatever food arrived on humanitarian aid trucks. The ideas of shopping for food, selecting which food to purchase, and selecting which quantities to purchase it in, etc. had to be taught.

Beyond providing such practical information, organizational workers described offering cultural knowledge about life in the United States as well. David (CAP) described that an important part of his job was organizing and conducting Cultural Orientation Classes for refugees who arrived in the United States. In these classes, David explained that he would cover a wide variety of topics, from "cultural expectations for parenting in the United States – for instance, here it is not appropriate to hit or beat your children – to expectations for dating and friendships between men and women and other important life information." As he conducts these classes, David told me that he "explains the way things are here." Of course, such an assertion relies on two important assumptions. First, such an assertion relies on the idea that "here" has a definitively identifiable cultural practice. For instance, to presume that there is a particular set of expectations for friendships between men and women in America denies that there are multiple models of friendship in the United States. Second, such an assertion relies on the assumption that the speaker (in this case David) has reasonable expertise as to what those



cultural practices are and can thus lecture on them. Thus, through the Cultural Orientation Sessions, David positions himself and others who lead the classes as experts on life in the United States. Similarly, the Cultural Orientation booklet, provided by Community Action Partnership to refugees who take the class, provides additional information about daily traditions and practices in the United States. For example, information about personal hygiene practices in the United States indicates that, “Most people in America bathe themselves at least every other day. Washing yourself and your clothing regularly is expected” (Welcome to Nebraska Guidebook, 2011, p. 4). Throughout the book, many such declarative statements can be found. Rhetorically then, the book’s style gives it an authoritative voice and positions the book as a type of “expert” information about life in the United States.

Catholic Social Services workers also describe providing cultural information to their refugee-clients. For example, Melissa told me that she often taught refugees about cultural differences between their home nations and the United States. When asked to describe one cultural lesson she remembered imparting, Melissa (CSS) responded:

I would say that... you have to know that the extended family in their culture, versus how we are in our families in our culture, when you are 21 you live on your own without your family, by yourself. Unless you’re in college, or when you get out of college, you’re on your own by yourself whereas in their culture, you have a grandmother, you know you have the children, and you are all living in the same house.

She explained that because family living arrangements are very different in the United States than they are in many other nations, this information was useful to several of the families she served. At times, however, the cultural knowledge shared was much less monumental. As Christopher (CSS) describes:

I just remembered a story where the high school girl, because they are Muslim, they've got their head scarves and everything, but they are still trying to be hip or whatever. So she is all proud that she's got this Las Vegas T-Shirt. I'm sure she got it at Goodwill or something. So they are asking me about Las Vegas. So, all of a sudden it hits me that she doesn't want to be wearing a Las Vegas T-Shirt.

Because that is against all of their Muslim stuff... so I was trying to tell them "sin city" and gambling and stuff and so she says "ohhh," so she doesn't wear that T-shirt any more.

Even though Christopher describes this story as an example of "silly stuff," he also concludes, "That is fun, trying to explain different cultures and stuff." By purporting to "explain" the American culture to this high school girl, Christopher rhetorically positions himself as a type of expert on cultural life in the United States.

Interestingly, throughout these interviews, it became clear that organizational staff members typically understood themselves as mere "conduits" for knowledge/expertise sharing. Essentially, they saw themselves as privy to information (whether information about access to services or American cultural knowledge) which was factual, fixed and external to themselves. They then just "shared" that information with refugees. However, characterizing such knowledge as value-free is limited at best. For instance, while Las

Vegas may rhetorically be linked to “Sin City,” wearing a Vegas T-Shirt could have multiple meanings, many of which are disconnected from alcohol, sex, and gambling (perhaps the T-Shirt signifies a concert or stage performance, of which there are many in Las Vegas that would be Muslim-friendly). As a result, these organizational staff members actually function as mediators of cultural knowledge and expertise, selecting and interpreting what to present and how to present it to their refugee-clients. The impact of this mediating role on the power of organizational “expertise” will be further explored in Chapter 7’s discussion. Overall, then, the staff I interviewed explained that they enjoyed communicating information to refugees about life in the United States and in that way, they positioned themselves as experts on life in the United States.

### **Refugees Seek Information Beyond Workers’ Expertise**

While the position of “expert” was described by organizational staff as a frequently enjoyable one, there were times that organizational staff members saw their position as an expert on life in the United States as problematic. Specifically, the workers found that once they were positioned as experts in the minds of refugees, many refugees expected them to be experts on everything about life in the United States. Since such comprehensive understanding is rare if not impossible, the workers then inevitably disappointed their clients which led both parties to be frustrated. For instance, Lisa reports that in her role as an employee of Community Action Partnership she occasionally teaches the Cultural Orientation classes. In those classes, the refugees “ask me questions, so I feel like I should know a lot about the community and should be able to answer those questions.” However, Lisa continues that “whenever people want to

know things about the community and stuff, like, I'm not from Lincoln and so it is kind of hard." Similarly, Christopher (CSS) describes how the refugees he works with often turn to him when they are looking for work. According to Christopher, the refugees often assume that he has connections or can find them a job. But, as he explains, "I don't have any great insight, any great inside help. Because I don't know anybody that can hire them. But, they'll ask about that." Beyond seeking community information and connections, refugees also ask for services that the particular agencies are unable to provide. John (CAP) recalls a specific instance in which he was asked a question outside what his organization does:

There've been questions that I don't know how to answer. Like on last Saturday, one person in my English class came over... and he went to the doctor and he got a bill and he didn't know what to do. So, I thought, maybe he can be on Medicaid, and I said, maybe ... I'm not sure what he's supposed to do, so, when people have problems like that, sometimes I don't know what I'm supposed to do. Like, I try to figure it out, but still, I don't have that knowledge on hand.

Because Community Action Partnership does not provide medical insurance or provide Medicaid directly, in this instance John was unsure as to how the refugee might go about paying his medical bill.

These times when refugees seek information or expertise that the organizational staff workers were unable to provide provoked frustration for both sides. After recounting a particular instance in which a woman wanted Lisa (CAP) to set up several medical appointments for her, even though Lisa was unsure how to do that, Lisa said, "She

seemed really frustrated and I felt really bad. There have been a few times like that and that's really hard." Lisa continued, "I feel kind of frustrated when people ask for my help and I don't know what to do. I will like try to figure it out, but I'll, sometimes they'll ask me then and then I'll never see them again, so it is hard." Thus, while both sides are frustrated, this breakdown in the organizational staff member's expert positioning can be particularly problematic for refugees who might as a result opt out of participation in a continued communicative relationship with someone who violated their expectations by not being able to provide needed knowledge.

### **Trouble Communicating Scope**

As a result, the organizational staff members that I interviewed claimed that one of the important things that they did as organizational representatives was to explain the scope of their organization to their refugee-clients, making clear what they can and cannot do. However, due to a number of factors, including language barriers, information overload, and culture shock, refugees often do not seem to fully absorb those messages. For instance, Angela (CAP) explains that it is difficult to explain what Community Action Partnership does and does not do because they are involved in so many different programs (including education, refugee/immigration legal status paperwork, housing assistance, job training, etc.). As a result, she says, "I do think even the normal person on the street doesn't understand everything that we do. But, step-by-step process, they know that. I mean we explain it to [refugees] at recruitment what we do and what their responsibility is, but they kind of learn gradually." Because they are involved in so many

different types of programs, Angela acknowledges that it would be easy to be confused as to what Community Action Partnership cannot do for their refugee-clients.

Moreover, even if refugee-clients do understand at an intellectual level that an agency might not be able to help them gain some particular information, they may still turn to the agency if they are emotionally overwhelmed. Jennifer (CSS) explains that:

When they get over here, of course, we make them listen... a translator is there and we tell them "This is what we do." I think that, so the communication is there, do they comprehend it? I hope so. Do they remember? I think that just out of frustration, even if intellectually they have conceptualized CSS only does so much, when they're frustrated, I mean, they don't have anybody else to go to but us.

In this case, Jennifer explains that while Catholic Social Services tries to communicate what their agency can and cannot do, a refugee overwhelmed with the profoundly different life he or she is thrust into in the United States may seek help outside the bounds of Catholic Social Services' practice anyway. Michael (CSS) agrees:

When somebody comes to the US, the less information they have about the culture, the more they will latch onto anybody who speaks English, understands the culture and has expressed a willingness to help them... It's just a matter of when they first arrive, especially if it's a so-called free case that doesn't have any friends or family members here, we're the only people making ourselves available to them to help them, so they will come to us with everything.

In the end then, agencies like Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership may continue to try to define their scope of operations for refugees, but by positioning themselves as experts on some matters of life in the United States, it is unsurprising perhaps that refugees seek information from them that is beyond their scope of practice or expertise, causing frustration and disappointment for all involved.

### **Alternative Communication of Expertise**

Finally, the refugees I interviewed spoke to their desire for their own expertise and ideas to be more fully acknowledged by organizational staff members and asked that they be given more opportunities to share experiential expertise with other refugees who may have resettled in the United States. Jennifer (CSS) supported this idea by arguing that nonprofit organizational staff have to be careful not to present themselves as the sole experts on life in the United States, saying instead that refugees can teach us as well. She explains, “Don’t degrade them in any way, don’t, because, they don’t know anything about American culture, don’t act like you know everything. And treat them as if they can teach you.” Michelle (CSS) extends this sentiment when she explains that for services and goods to be effectively provided, “I think that get to know them is very important. Know their culture, to know the people they are. And how do they look at things.” Essentially, nonprofit workers must understand the clients they are serving at an individual level for that service to be effective.

Stephanie (CAP) describes one way that this refugee experience can be enacted as expert communication when she talked excitedly about the value of emergent parental

groups among refugee families in Community Action Partnership's educational programs. She explained:

I think it starts within their similar group and then it expands out, and you know, in ever growing or widening circles... They become at least close enough acquaintances that they can at least offer support and celebration for each other. I don't know that they necessarily be best friends forever, but they certainly look forward to interacting and knowing that there are others facing similar kinds of challenges.

It appears, therefore, that there is some agency support for this type of experiential expertise to be communicated by and among the refugees themselves. However, John (CAP) cautions that these types of community support groups can be problematic:

It is kind of ironic in a sense. But, when I have two [refugees] in the same background, the temptation is strong for those two to become kind of a dyad, because those two communicate between each other and they understand each other better, and that becomes almost a barrier to the rest... I would almost prefer to have only one person from any given culture at any given time so that it almost forces them to maybe open up a bit more, to immerse a bit more in the culture as well as the language or become more able to cope with it.

In this, John expresses his fear that if refugees are able to form community groups with other refugees with the same national, religious or linguistic background, they may be able to use those groups to avoid integrating themselves more broadly into American life. To John, it is helpful to have non-refugees (or at least different refugees) in a group to



help force people to learn the language and culture of the United States. What is revealed in John's statements, moreover, is the ultimate goal of this expertise sharing from the perspective of these mediating organizations. To both agencies, communicating about life in the United States is done in the ultimate hope that refugees would integrate (by which they largely mean assimilate) into American culture. Despite the fact that some refugees might be able to function quite well by living in a refugee community (where they could continue to speak their home language, practice cultural and religious rituals from their home nations, work in community cultural centers and grocery stores, etc.), organizational staff members that I interviewed saw that as undesirable isolationism. For instance, James (CAP) argued:

So if I'm a refugee from Burma that comes in, I'll hear from the agency that resettles me but it also my fellow Burmese and the community so of those folks are working or those folks are involved in a church, so that's how I'm going to learn. It's really, the hard part is that you are really at the whim of the cultures in those community groups.

James obviously did not want the refugees he worked with to be "at the whim of the cultures" of their local community groups. Rather, he wanted refugees to listen to and to follow his agency's ideas about integration. Therefore, while self-sufficiency is the explicitly stated goal of these agencies (see theme two below), being self-sufficient in a refugee community was not seen as success. Refugees were expected to assimilate to the American culture more broadly (in simplistic terms – identifying a single American culture is of course difficult, at best).

Thus, the tension surrounding knowledge and expertise persists because while organizational staff frequently communicate important knowledge to refugee-clients about goods, services and cultural life in the United States, their rhetorical positioning as “experts” on all things American can cause disappointment and frustration when those expectations are unmet. Moreover, communicating the limits to the scope of agency abilities seems incomplete at best. Finally, experiential expertise communicated by refugees to one another can serve as a valuable educational tool, but might simultaneously discourage some refugees from integrating more fully into non-refugee American communities.

### **Empowerment and Bureaucracy**

Given the explicitly stated goals of both Catholic Social Services and of Community Action Partnership to empower refugees to be self-sufficient actors in their own lives, empowerment discourses occupy a prominent role in the organizational staff members’ descriptions of their communicative relationships with the refugees they serve. But while many of the workers extolled the benefits of empowerment and were quick to describe empowerment success stories, some wondered how a nonprofit worker can communicate someone into empowerment. They worried about providing guidance without being overly controlling and asked, when is empowerment allowing someone to fail on their own terms? Further, the organizational participants I interviewed also recognized that their empowerment efforts were inextricably bound up in bureaucratic organizational forms. However, while organizational workers understood that strict rules and procedures (which were often out of the hands of individual workers) could be

constraining, they could also function positively to promote uniformity and fairness in their communication with refugee-clients.

### **Communicating Empowerment**

Though providing immediately needed goods and services dominated communication with refugees in their first days and weeks in the United States, just as the refugees explained in the previous chapter, the primary long-term goal of organizational workers at both Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership is to communicate with refugees in empowering ways. As Jennifer (CSS) summarizes, “our main objective is to help refugees become self-sufficient as quickly as possible.” To do that, John (CAP) explains that Community Action Partnership encourages its paid staff and volunteers to:

Be in partnership with the client, but the client as a lead partner. You’re support. You’re support. They are doing, you’re helping them do. But they need to be out in the front moving, you’re in a back encouraging, helping them with things they don’t understand. But always they are the one taking the initiative.

Thus, in the long-term, communication from organizational staff should encourage and provide support, but should not dictate how or what the refugee-clients do. In that way, refugees become more independent. James (CAP) elaborates using the issue of food as an example. He explains that some charities seek to help people by giving them food when they need it, “But at the same time, that’s not really solving the issue if you’re telling them here’s your box of food, when what are you going to do next week to get the food for yourself?” He continues, “We’re not doing them any good if we don’t teach them

from day one to survive in Lincoln Nebraska, or wherever, you've got to, the goal is self-sufficiency." However, this goal of self-sufficiency is not solely formed by thinking of the future economic interests of the refugees. James explains that, in Lincoln, Nebraska in particular, refugees who continue to rely on assistive services (like Medicaid or Food Stamps) for long are shunned by the community. He claims, "Because you [refugees] are ready seen as a dependent in terms of in the community, in the majority of the community's eyes. . . Otherwise, you'll always be a refugee who has come here and needs stuff from the community." Catholic Social Services fosters a similar sentiment through their refugee migration check list, which describes issues that case workers must communicate to their refugee-clients. Catholic Social Services indicates, "Discuss anti-immigrant feelings and the need for them to become productive/employed and to avoid PA [Public Assistance] unless last resort" (CSS Checklist, 2011). This rather harsh view of the climate in Lincoln may well be accurate. But, it is notable that rather than attempt to change the mindset of the community, this discourse of empowerment positions the refugee as needing to earn the community's respect through rapid self-sufficiency, despite the fact that arriving in the United States after experiencing violence and torture, with literally nothing in terms of material belongings, and little if any English language skills might provide legitimate reasons for not being self-sufficient in the first six months in the United States.

This primary goal of self-sufficiency arose for these organizations for two different reasons. First, self-sufficiency was seen by some organizational staff, notably from Catholic Social Services, as a type of "necessary evil" due to federal limits on the

length and amount of resettlement funding that could be allotted to any single refugee. For instance, Michael (CSS) explained, “when the whole family gets here, we’re working with a family almost exclusively for less than a year and really the vast majority less than six months.” Furthermore, he explained that the six month time limit is set by the United States Department of State (DOS), and that many of the self-sufficiency goals supported by Catholic Social Services (e.g. getting and keeping a job) are actually DOS requirements. For instance, Catholic Social Services caseworkers are told they must “Discuss employment stipulations as stated by DOS” with their refugee-clients (Checklist, 2011, p. 1). Thus, for some organizational staff, the goals of self-sufficiency and independence from agency/government support are handed down by legal and funding authorities.

For other organizational staff, most prominently in my interviews from Community Action Partnership, the goal of self-sufficiency was seen as a moral one, which pits the vices of laziness and complacency against the virtues of hard work and earning one’s keep. James (CAP) describes the importance of self-sufficiency in this way:

We’re not doing them any good if we don’t teach them from day one to survive in Lincoln Nebraska, or wherever, you’ve got to, the goal is self-sufficiency. Because you are ready seen as a dependent in terms of in the community, in the majority of the community's eyes. So if you really want to be respected and seen as a part of the community and accepted, these are the things you have to do for yourself. Otherwise, you’ll always be a refugee who has come here and needs

stuff from the community... the majority of people see these individuals as takers rather than as contributors.

In order to avoid being a “taker” or a “dependent,” which James clearly understands to be morally poor roles, refugees are encouraged to become self-sufficient as quickly as possible.

Reinforcing this primary goal of self-sufficiency, when organizational staff were asked about their “most positive” communication experiences with refugees, they often offered stories of refugees who became more self-sufficient with their help. For instance, Jason (CSS) who had worked with a refugee on from Burundi fondly recalled one time that he took the man to a medical supply store to pick up crutches to allow him to walk on his new artificial legs. Jason remembers, “So we went to this place and I sat there with him and the guy asks him his phone number and his address, and he could handle the conversation fairly well, and that was gratifying... To see him use some of the words that we had gone over in real life conversation was gratifying.” In this case, Jason is proud that the English language words that he had practiced with the refugee allowed the refugee to converse on his own behalf with the shop owner. Another victory story came from James (CAP) who explained that after spending extensive time with refugees trying to communicate about work culture in the United States, his “most exciting to see” moments are when “you see people like those show up for an appointment for the first time on time or when you see them put in a job application after being unemployed for two years.” In these cases, he sees that his communication with refugees results in tangible increases in self-sufficiency for refugees in terms of work.

Beyond these forms of self-reliance, Stephanie (CAP) explains that her most successful moments at work with Community Action Partnership come when refugee-clients are able to find their own voice and begin to represent themselves and their own interests. She says:

We've also had some great opportunities with people who choose to serve as an elected representative... on our policy council. So it is really interesting to see people who might join and very much be an observer at the beginning, and then over time, become more active. And, or, even decide to run for offices. Or, with translator at their side, or interpreter at their side, they will move ahead and really find their voice and so those kinds of strides are really, really make it worthwhile for me at least.

Overall, then, communicative successes, for many workers are those moments when refugees take the lessons imparted by the organizational workers and begin to enact them in their own ways in their own lives.

### **But, How to Communicate Empowerment without Control?**

Considering the key role that empowerment plays in defining successes in both Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership, I sought to understand more fully how that empowerment was achieved. Organizational staff members' stories revealed that communicating in empowering ways with refugee-clients perpetuates tensions between empowerment and control that must be carefully balanced. To begin, a number of the organizational staff members interviewed brought up the same Family Assessment Tools process that was mentioned by the refugee-clients in Chapter 4. The

family assessment forms ask refugees to walk through a series of questions about issues that may be of concern to their family (e.g. “do you have enough adequate resources to purchase food for your family?” or “Is the Apartment that you are in adequate?”) and then asks the refugee to rate each issue in terms of priorities (Angela, CAP). Through these assessment tools, organizational workers seek to enter a partnership with a particular refugee family around “what is the goal for your family?” (Angela, CAP). As Angela clarifies, “not what we think is a goal for them, but what they want.... So our family service workers will work with the adults in the household to meet whatever goals they want.” Heather (CAP) agrees, saying, “What we call family service workers meet with the families about family goals. Whether it has to do with budgeting, transportation, their own education, any issues within the family, whether it be alcoholism or drugs or just different things. So, we have a lot of contact with our families.” Such partnerships sound, at face value, like positive, motivating means of crafting self-sufficiency.

However, this positive façade is damaged slightly when I began to probe by asking, “What do you do to ensure the refugee pursues or achieves the goals you set?” Though of course answers like “encourage them” were common, some darker tactics emerged. Jason (CAP) responded:

Our tactics in terms of case management are to try to find the one to two things that make people the most miserable. So, if what makes me miserable is that I don’t like somebody telling me what to do, you know, I don’t like somebody telling me that I’ve got to go search for a job, for some people, that’s enough to say, I’m going to go find a job because I’m tired of having this person point the



finger at me. Or, my kids really want to get a soccer ball, and the only way to get a soccer ball is to work. So we try to find those things out, and then push those things and remind them, if this is what you really want, this is what you have to do.

Jason made clear that if someone really felt miserable when he or she was reminded that they did not yet have a job (and had to continue to search for one), he would regularly remind them that they did not have a job to motivate them to continue to search for one. Or, if someone was miserable that he or she could not buy a soccer ball for their children, Jason would remind them of that feeling of misery to spur them to look for a job. Though the ends may seem positive (as work may well be good for the refugee), the means through which that employment is encouraged are anything but.

Angela (CAP) described a second darker tactic that was employed at times with parents whose children were in need of major dental work. She explains that some refugee families come to the United States with children whose teeth have very bad decay. However, some families wrongly fear that if they take their children to the dentist and their children have such decay, the family will be deported. To encourage the families to go to the dentist, Angela indicates “if the child has such abscess in their teeth and parents refuse to do something about it, even though it is good for the child to get it fixed, then our staff are mandatory child abuse/neglect reporters.” In this case, the parents are told that if they do not accept the dental services, they can be reported as child abusers and their children will likely be removed from them. Again, the goal is clearly positive (as these children do really need the dental treatments). But, the threat of the

state taking a refugee's children seems a particularly harsh persuasion tactic as a response to a fear based on a misunderstanding of deportation law. Thus, it appears that at times these nonprofit organizations use controlling and threatening discourses as a means to their empowerment ends.

This begs the question, how can one empower someone by telling them what to do and how to do it? Many of the nonprofit organizational workers I spoke with acknowledged this contradiction by explaining that they do encourage refugees, at least after a point, to seek empowerment without organizational control. However, this freedom from control raises problems as well. Jason (CSS) introduces this contradiction by saying:

One thing from a challenging standpoint, there is this tendency to I mean these people have to be independent, and there's some things I can do and there's some things I can't do, and it's like, you know, I don't know. You know, you don't want to take over their life or anything like that. I don't know how to say this but, there's a tendency to identify with these people and their problems or whatever, and you want to help them more than you should. So you just do what you are supposed to do and that's it.

Interestingly, his description positions organizational workers as limited in what they "should" do to help refugees, and positions himself as trying not to do more than he "should." Stephanie (CAP) supports this sentiment that their role should be limited when she explains "They determine the path. That is not our job to decide what the next step should be." Of course, this limit placed on the help provided can be difficult for refugees

to understand. Kim (CSS) said, “We don’t do things for them that they determine that they can do for themselves. And that’s kind of a big shock when we expect them to take over and figure these things out and do it and so, but that is the whole purpose.”

Of course, while asking someone to learn to survive on their own in the United States without controlling those ends is desirable in many ways, when organizational staff cede control of empowerment to refugees, they also must accept that some refugees will fail to achieve positive ends. Stephanie explains, “They take steps forward and sometimes steps backward and turn around and try a step forward again. If they try something and it doesn’t work, we’ll be there and if they think of and try a new strategy or if they try a new angle or just stop for a moment and lick their wounds before they go on.” Similarly, Jason (CSS) said, “You just have to draw a line and say, I’m going to help this guy with this thing. I’m going to help him learn English, and he’s going to bumble along, and he’s going to have some things that he’s going to screw up, and that’s not my job.” Through these sentiments, Jason and Stephanie indicate that while ceding control to refugees allows them the chance to succeed on their own terms, it also means allowing them to fail on their own terms.

Therefore, successful empowerment programs require a balance between too little communication with and to refugees and too much communication with and to refugees. When communication is too infrequent or refugees are too independent from organizational staff, the ability of organizational workers to help refugees is seriously limited. For instance, Michael (CSS) explains:

Generally the Iraqis, who do generally understand this culture a little better because it's a Western culture, civilized like where they come from- so the ones who are semi-independent or partially independent, they'll go out and do things that we need to know about and we're supposed to be taking care for them and they'll not communicate back to us. That kind of stuff or they'll do things and not give us information that we need so we can keep track of where they are in the process and so on and so forth.

When refugees, like those Iraqi refugees, make their own plans or decisions without keeping the organizational staff in the information loop, the resettlement agencies are less able to provide help when it is needed. Michael provided a second example to clarify:

Our Burmese population specifically... these folks meet volunteers [at church] who will make appointments for these people and then we won't hear anything about it, so suddenly two days before the appointment, an interpreter will call us and so, oh by the way, such and such has an appointment in two days with this doctor. And then we have to kind of do this little scramble... it might be a timeslot that's a conflict with what our case managers might be doing otherwise, so suddenly there's an appointment that we can't transport them to, so that's an example of when there is miscommunication.

In this example, the Burmese refugee is not self-sufficient (as the Iraqi refugees might be), but rather, they are meeting other Burmese refugees through their religious organizations who help them make medical appointments. This is problematic for Catholic Social Services, however, who might then not be able to help the refugee

actually attend the appointment. In that sense, too little communication (or too much independence) can actually limit empowerment aid from the nonprofit organizations.

On the other hand, when asked, Michael affirms that there is certainly the possibility of being included too frequently in the refugees' lives. He explains:

There are times when people try to involve us in things that we just can't get involved in, since we are their resettlement agency and we're taking care of everything, they might involve us in and this will usually come about afterward. . . . they're not really our clients anyway. If there's a dispute with a neighbor, sometimes there can be problems involving the police, with neighbors, with somebody else in the settlement community, sometimes with another refugee, that kind of thing and they want us to get involved and help them do this and that and those kinds of things aren't really for us to deal with.

Therefore, one of the central tensions of empowerment from the perspective of the organizational staff appears to be a question of how much to communicate and how and to what extent to control the communication to support empowerment in a meaningful way.

### **Communicating through Bureaucratic Control**

Just as the refugee-participants described experiencing both Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership as highly bureaucratic organizations, organizational staff workers agreed that their organizations expected refugees to comply with fairly strict rules. For instance, when refugees are first resettled in the United States, Kim (CSS) indicated that are required to attend English language classes "every morning

from 9-12.” Then, as refugees begin to find work, they are enrolled in night classes. Kim explains that these mandatory classes can be difficult for refugees because:

When these refugees and immigrants are working a full shift, and some of those are working like 10 hour a day shifts, I don’t know if they [the employers] are taking advantage of them or what, but they come and they are ready to fall asleep.

Or, they come straight from work and they haven’t even eaten.

Despite these difficulties (which they do try to help, for instance by providing snacks at the classes), refugees are still expected to attend class. Similarly, Community Action Partnership places clear rules on refugees who participate in their services. For instance, “if there is no communication from the client or response to agency inquires for longer than two (2) weeks, the client will be suspended from the program for two (2) months” (Employment Participation Rules, 2011). In both programs, refugees must find and keep a job and pay for a certain percentage of their own bills after a set amount of time. This requirement, too, has implications for refugees and their families. Melissa (CSS) tells one story in which:

In the case of the woman from Iraq. . . Her sons were like 19 and 17 and they were well aware that mom had to pay, that “if we have to pay the light bill every month after 5 months of being here with Catholic Social Services, because they try to empower these families to be independent, fully functional, that we can’t go to school, we have to go out to work.” So, they basically, they didn’t bother going to school, they just learned to work in the Muslim community, going out to get

jobs and try to do what they can to try to support their mom, because she was a widow, so they had to do that.

In this story, because Catholic Social Services' rules require the family to pay their own electricity bill after five months of living in the United States, this Iraqi widow's sons had to choose to find employment rather than attend school and develop their educations.

In fact, the requirement by both agencies that refugees quickly find work in the United States was acknowledged again and again by organizational staff as a rule with particularly problematic effects on many refugees, who are often educated professionals in their home countries. John (CAP) explains that refugees' educational credentials must always be re-earned in the United States:

Just imagine, imagine that you were suddenly forced to leave the United States, to go to a country whose language you did not know and you could not access your academic records. So suddenly after earning a college degree, your Masters, now suddenly you're sitting back and a classroom force to re-earn a high school diploma... And I think that that is, for many of them, the great source of frustration.

Even refugees who might have access to their educational credentials are often unable to get them transferred to the United States. As Stephanie (CAP) indicates:

You know they might have been a professional in their country; they might have been a physician or an attorney or a teacher and they come and none of that education or none of those certifications are acknowledged here. So, they may

find themselves going from a respected professional in their community to someone who is cleaning hotel rooms.

This acknowledgement that most refugees are forced to work down, in terms of pay or prestige, from their previous jobs was echoed by Jason (CSS) who explains, “The jobs they get are the menial, folding sheets in the laundry or working, you know, the Holiday Inn or something.”

While several organizational staff members acknowledged that this job transition would be “depressing for anyone to have to go through” (David, CAP), other staff members reacted with some hostility to the possibility that the pressure for refugees to find menial work was unfair. James (CAP) reports that some refugees “from Arabic cultures that have just developed *expectations* over time of what America should offer them” [emphasis mine]. Through his tone, James implies that these are unrealistic expectations. Kim (CSS) agrees:

I don’t want to mention any particular culture, but there have been times, and they haven’t really been with me, but I do know that there certainly are times where the refugees, especially the more educated ones, often come with the ideas that they will just have everything as they want it when they get here. And if they find out if they are educated and they really can’t get a job in their field, they can get very, I guess critical and resistant, so they are complaining that they are too good to do the job that we can get for them.

Thus, Kim believes refugees should be grateful for what Catholic Social Services is able to find refugees, even if it not a job in their field. Interestingly, this idea that refugees



should be grateful for what they are provided is institutionalized in the Catholic Social Services refugee intake checklist, in which organizational staff are told to “Explain the need of the refugee to exhibit courteous, cooperative behavior toward volunteers and staff; consequences if they fail to do so” and “Discuss social skills... acting grateful to volunteers” (CSS Checklist, 2011). Therefore, while many organizational workers acknowledge that strict organizational rules often cause refugees to “work down” from their potential, there is little agreement among organizational staff as to whether that form of control is a negative thing.

In addition to acknowledging the potential for bureaucratic rules to cause problems for refugees, other workers described ways in which the bureaucracy made their own jobs serving refugees more difficult. For instance, Christopher (CSS) tells of one young refugee girl that needed a dentist appointment, and his dentist offered to see her for free. However, because his dentist was not on the preapproved list of providers, it took him months to be able to do that. He summarizes, “it got delayed by the bureaucracy and then they wound up seeing my dentist anyway. So, I was a little disappointed sort of with that, we could have gotten it over sooner.”

When asked about his least favorite part of communicating with refugees, John (CAP) quickly responded, “The least enjoyable part of any job for me is the paperwork and the records. It’s got to be done, and I have no quarrel with it, but it is mind numbing in a way. Entering numbers onto a page to keep track of everything is not a lot of fun. Working with the [refugees] is the fun part, that’s where I feel most engaged.” He felt that all of the paperwork was a distraction from his true job. Worse even, Lisa (CAP)

described that, at times, the paperwork was so copious that it caused certain refugees to get lost in the system, saying:

It is really hard, things get lost, and there's like a paper trail, and that's always kind of frustrating. You have files and you're handing files around and things get messed up. And, people slip through the cracks. That is what is really frustrating. People come to you for help and sometimes like there's miscommunication even within your organization.

Overall, then, the presence of detailed rules and bureaucracy in these nonprofit refugee resettlement organizations functioned in ways which were at times problematic both for the refugees and for the workers in these organizations.

Nevertheless, bureaucratic controls were often perceived as out of the hands of the workers themselves or even the agencies more broadly. Instead, as David (CAP) articulates, Refugee Resettlement programs at Community Action Partnership are “80% funded by Federal funds, so you're kind of that the whim of every administration. And the sheer volume of just paperwork and that type of thing is just -” [he trails off]. This sense that refugee resettlement organizations are inevitably at the mercy of larger bureaucracies that provide their funding was reinforced by Michael (CSS):

Well there are a ton of hoops. There is a ton of paperwork and we're getting money from the State Department in one channel and the US Conference of Catholic Bishops in the same channel, this major national organization and then in another channel, we're getting money from the State of Nebraska and the United States Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugees Settlement,

so it goes without saying that for all of those four entities, to be accountable to all those, there is a tremendous amount of paperwork involved. . . It's social services, social work, taking money from a lot of huge organizations, governmental organizations that demand or require all sorts of documentation, but that's just part of the game.

Because these governmental and religious organizations provide the funding for refugee resettlement to Catholic Social Services (and with the exception of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops also provide funding to Community Action Partnership), they set the requirements that these organizations have to meet. So, for example, Catholic Social Services is required under the terms of their resettlement contract with the federal government to work "with a family almost exclusively for less than a year and really the vast majority less than six months." Thus, while from the refugee's perspective the organizations strict rules and time limits are controlling, they are also the conditions under which the organizations are able to offer any help at all.

Moreover, bureaucratic controls were often accepted and expected by workers because they also functioned to make the organizations more accountable and helped workers to treat refugees more uniformly and fairly overall. For instance, John (CAP) argued that bureaucratic processes for measurement (including requirements that refugees must take pretests and posttests) in their refugee resettlement GED classes allow Community Action Partnership to "prove to them yes, the student in our class after 25 hours of instruction, has improved a score from this point to this point. They scored a 290 on an initial practice test, but now they've scored a 350, a 60 point increase. So this is a

benefit to them, and we can see some progress, so this is going to be a success in the long run.” This accountability to grant funders ensures that the programs maintain a high quality, which helps refugees overall.

Similarly, nation-wide standards set by the national Community Action Partnership office creates uniformity for refugees, so that they can go from an office “in Manhattan, Kansas and move here and know exactly who to call and they know what to expect when they arrive. That’s positive for participants as well as for us as a program” (Stephanie, CAP). In addition to helping refugee-participants, Stephanie indicates, “It is also good because it allows us to network with our peers across the country. I can call another director in another state and know that she is grappling with a very similar issue. Because we all are going to need to meet the same expectations. So those are some of the good things about it.” Thus, in that way, uniformity benefits refugee-participants in terms of creating clear expectations and benefits organizational staff by fostering inter-agency support.

Finally, strict rules were seen by some agency workers as essential to providing services to everyone. Jennifer (CSS) explains:

Well, I think that when they come to the front desk, we tell them that they have to make an appointment because number one if they come and their case worker is not here, a lot of time their case worker isn’t going to be here because the case worker is out in the field doing, you know, helping families... I know they don’t understand, but all I can do is say, give me your name and number and your case worker will call you back and I think those are the times that I think are the most

frustrating, because they come all of the way here because they are wanting something, and I have to send them away and I know they are frustrated.

So, while the “no emergency services without appointment” sign on the Catholic Social Services building door (on 5/10/2011) seemed absurd from the vantage point of a refugee-participant, from Jennifer’s perspective, it is impossible for agency workers unfamiliar with a refugee and his/her situation to provide meaningful services. By enforcing the appointment rule, refugees are better served overall.

Thus, the tension surrounding empowerment and bureaucratic control persists because while empowerment discourses occupy a prominent role in the organizational staff members’ descriptions of their communicative relationships with the refugees they serve, nonprofit staff struggled with the balance between communication and silence, between interventionist and hands-off approaches. Further, the organizational participants I interviewed also recognized that their empowerment efforts were inextricably bound up in bureaucratic organizational forms. However, while organizational workers understood that strict rules and procedures (which were often out of the hands of individual workers) could be constraining, they could also function positively to promote uniformity and accountability in their communication with refugee-clients.

### **Intervention and “Liberation”**

As part of their perceived calling to communicate American cultural knowledge to the refugees they serve, my organizational participants often expressed a desire to communicate to refugees American rights and freedoms and cultural practices because “some are coming with the idea that they can’t do anything, because their entire life has

been under control or duress” (James, CAP). However, this desire to intervene to “liberate” refugees from their established national, ethnic, religious or other cultural practices caused conflict for some. Essentially, some wondered, who determines what are the preferable rights and practices? When is it the moral responsibility of an organizational staff member to help ‘liberate’ and when must a responsible person respect different cultural practices? These tensions appeared to be primarily clustered around four issues: (a) sex and gender; (b) children and parenting; (c) hospitality; and (d) workplace culture.

### **Communicating Sex and Gender**

Just as the refugee-participants I interviewed spoke about how their interactions with American nonprofit workers exposed them to new sex and gender relationships in the United States, the nonprofit organizational staff that I interviewed often struggled with what they perceived to be an inappropriately unequal relationship between the sexes in many of the refugee families they served. Melissa (CSS) explains that “the families that are here with their husbands and the wives, the women, they’re not necessarily independent, per say... but I mean they don’t drive, they don’t, they are reliant on the male person in the home to get the things that they need for the family.” This dependence of women on men, and the men’s dominance of women were seen as problematic for the self-sufficiency goals supported by both Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership. James (CAP) illustrates this point:

Well one of the hardest things is, you know, the structure of the Arabic household is mother stays home with the kids, she is not allowed to work generally. And...

the goal is to improve the family situation or to get them to improve their situation. So, that can be a real barrier at times. You're trying to get the family self-sufficient, but the father of the household, or the male head of household, is the one that says "I," he's in control. And that's the reality, so there is no one else working. And it's what he says that goes, so if he doesn't choose to work, it is not like mom can say, "you stay home, I'm going to go out and work." That's not the way that works.

Not only did these sex-based power differences hurt the families' economic self-sufficiency, the cultural requirements that women not speak to or accept help from men outside the home hurt the ability of some Muslim women to get help when it was needed. For instance, John (CAP) noticed:

A real reticence on the part of Muslim women to communicate. The cultural requirements are, to have as limited a connection with a man outside of the family as possible. At least from those who observe very strongly. And, and so I have noticed a real reticence on the part of some, of my female Muslim students to talk very openly about things when they have problems.

As someone teaching refugees through Community Action Partnership's Center for Refugees and Immigrants, not having female students tell him when they were experiencing problems was a huge frustration as it limited John's ability to help them.

Furthermore, some organizational workers saw the culturally accepted differences in sexual power in their refugee-clients as threatening to their own values. Jennifer (CSS) describes how other women in her office have felt that "it's challenging to deal, to deal

with a culture where the men definitely play the dominant role and the women are to play the submissive role. And, I talk about that in training. . . Know your values and be aware when your values are challenged, and be ready to talk about them.”

Because of those understandings of the problems caused by inequalities between the sexes, some organizational workers did attempt to encourage families to adopt a more egalitarian relationship between the sexes expected in the United States. Interestingly, most of the time workers described encouraging men to be more involved in traditionally feminine spheres of parenting and education. For example, Heather (CAP) explains that as part of her role with a children’s educational program, mothers are typically her primary contact. However, “over the past two years we have tried to push for dads to be much more involved and inclusive in our program.” Similarly, while Stephanie (CAP) indicates that it is typically the father who enrolls his children in educational programs since “the father is the gatekeeper”; typically the mother is the one that remains involved. As a result, Stephanie indicates that Community Action Partnership tries to encourage men to become involved in the educational program, saying, we “invite men whether they be grandfathers or uncles or fathers to be very active in the program. And they can serve on our governing body, our policy council, they can serve as a volunteer with the program, they can come to parent events.”

Conversely, it is interesting that the organizational staff members I spoke with nearly universally rejected that it was their place to communicate to men or women that women should be treated in more equal ways. For instance, Angela (CAP) described one refugee mother who was working for Community Action Partnership with the program



that her child was involved in. Angela says, “Her husband, because of their culture, really did not like her making more money than him or working more hours than him. And so sometimes there were some family dynamics there that we needed to deal with. So, we accommodated that and only gave her so many hours, even though she loved what she did.” Angela continues by describing how she had to be very cautious not to impose her ideas on this family:

You know, sometimes it is the men that are the dominant in the family, and so you have to be very cautious, so that even though you and I are very independent women, we can’t impose that on them or expect it to happen. So, even though it is something that we don’t, we’re not subservient in a lot of respects, but in some cultures you have to respect that and go with that because that is their culture.

Angela clearly indicates that despite the unequal treatment of women, of which she personally disapproves, she does not believe that it is her place to express that to the family. James elaborates further that he does not intervene in these sexual differences because he believes it would not change the minds of the refugees anyway. He says, “to tell them [refugee women], to convince them, you can do whatever you want here, you can tell an Iraqi woman that all day, but if her husband, he runs the show, it doesn’t matter. Because his law trumps what you’re telling her in the case management session.”

Thus, while many of the organizational staff members indicated that they saw inequalities between men and women in their refugee families as problematic both for the families and for their own value systems, they only felt comfortable encouraging men to adopt more power (by becoming active in feminine spheres of education and parenting),

but did not feel comfortable encouraging women to become more powerful (or encouraging men to cede some power to their wives). Instead, they claimed that it was not their place to interfere.

### **Communicating Parenting**

While issues of inequalities between the sexes were the most frequently described context of the internal debate over whether to intervene in refugees' lives, organizational staff workers also struggled with when and how to intervene in the refugees' understandings of children and appropriate parenting. This was particularly evident in struggles over understandings of educational programs for children. As part of their refugee services, Community Action Partnership offers preschool programming for the young children of refugees and immigrants. However, several Community Action Partnership staff members noted that the refugee understandings and the organizational staff understandings of the importance of involvement (of both children and parents) in these programs often varied significantly. For instance, Heather (CAP) describes the different outlooks held about the role of the preschool:

I think sometimes the biggest challenges are in, you know, as educators we feel, we want those children to be here every day, we want them to be on time, we want them to be involved, we want our families involved. And we run into some of the cultures, especially within the African population, a couple of the families, that wasn't a priority for them. It was okay if their child was only here two hours a day twice a week.

These differences in educational priorities were also noted by Angela (CAP) who explained, “even though we say this is a comprehensive preschool program and family involvement is the ideal, we still have families that just want to drop off their kids to get rid of them for the day because they are stressed or whatever and then come pick them up.” For these Community Action Partnership staff, these different perceptions about the program raised questions of how to respect those cultural outlooks while “correcting” them (to the American view of Education). For instance, while Heather claims, “it took us a while to overcome that challenge to understand that we needed to work with them within their culture and meet their needs and to understand that they thought they were doing a really great job,” which sounds as if she acknowledges refugees’ cultural understanding of education and believes it is important to respect those understandings, she then immediately continues:

And then help move them towards understanding that we respect their culture and their understanding of the education system, but we also need to... [get] them to understand that it is important that they are on time, that they pick their children up on time, that they are here every day.

As a result, Heather reveals in her statements that tension between respecting refugees’ cultural understandings and “educating” them to “better” cultural standards for education in the United States.

Education was not the only context in which some organizational staff members struggled with communicating about the roles of children and parenting in the United States. Determining how to appropriately discipline children was also difficult for some

staff. David (CAP) explained to me that one of the difficulties that organizational staff members face is that “many of the refugees we serve were raised in cultures in which it is common to physically discipline children, by hitting them for instance for transgressions.” Such behavior, however, is largely seen as culturally inappropriate (and in some forms is actually illegal) in the United States. As a result, David indicated that during their Cultural Orientation Classes, Community Action Partnership instructors explain to refugee parents that they cannot hit their children or yell or call them names. If any of these things are done, “they are breaking the law and will be held responsible for this crime. They could have their children taken away” (Cultural Orientation Handbook, 2011, p. 8).

The Catholic Social Services documents are less detailed, simply advising organizational staff to explain to refugees “American views and laws regarding... child care/abuse” (Checklist, 2011, p. 2). Catholic Social Services workers described knowing what to say as they negotiated those differences in understandings of parenting. For instance, Amy (CSS) explains one of her struggles when she visited one of her refugee families in their home:

One of the things that was difficult with them, is that they weren’t allowed to discipline their kids the same way as they would in their home country, because they were told here not to hit their children. And that’s a good thing, but it seemed to take away their ability or their sense of authority with their children, which was kind of sad and I didn’t know how to communicate with them about that.

Thus while Amy believes that communicating with refugees that not hitting their children is a positive thing, she is unsure as to how to communicate with them about how to more appropriately discipline their children in an American cultural context. Similarly, Michelle (CSS) described how one of the refugee families she served as a Catholic Social Services volunteer actually tried to communicate with her about discipline. She explains that the parents brought it up “several times” that:

In America, you know “No smack. No hit.” But, then they would say, but I tell my child to not to do this or not to do that, and they don’t listen. And, somehow they got, they were taught, I guess to have them stand in the corner or some other alternative, but... he [their father] stressed that even that, that it doesn’t work.

They weren’t in a lot of control I noticed. They jumped on furniture, stuff that you wouldn’t let your kids do. But, it wasn’t really my place to, I didn’t know how to communicate with them about that.

As this story indicates, despite the fact that the parents of this refugee family brought up their struggles with disciplining in an American context with Michelle (CSS), Michelle felt it was not her place to communicate with the parents about how to discipline their children.

Overall, then, when organizational staff members from both Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership encountered differences between refugees’ understandings of education or discipline, they struggled with how to respect culturally different practices while simultaneously educating refugees to the preferred practices in the United States.

## **Communicating Hospitality**

A third context in which differing cultural understandings raised questions of how and to what extent it was appropriate to try to enforce American cultural values were different cultural understandings of hospitality. This tension was particularly prevalent because so many of the organizational staff and volunteers in both organizations visited refugees in their homes as part of their provision of services. Understandings of the appropriate roles of hosts and hostesses, however, varied between some organizational staff and the refugees they served.

One organizational worker, Michelle (CSS) described one of the female refugees she served from Iraq as “very good to me... she really treats me very well, she is very kind to me, she always offer her food from her country to me to have a taste.” To Michelle, who was a Chinese woman who had immigrated to the United States, this offering of food was a sign not only of respect, but of inclusion in the woman’s family. She explained, “I’ve sensed that their culture is very similar to Chinese culture. I am a Chinese. And then, their family type is very strong.” So, to Michelle, this type of hospitality was welcomed. However, not all organizational staff were so appreciative. Amy (CSS) explained that the thing she found most difficult about communicating with refugees was:

I guess that their custom was to always put food out and something to drink and I know that they probably didn’t have much to spare, but I didn’t want to decline any, decline it because it seemed important to them that I take. It was kind of

difficult because it was just one of those cultural customs I think where we don't know what the other person's culture is, what the expectations are?

In this situation, Amy does not want to offend refugees' cultural expectations of hospitality by refusing the food or drink that they offer, but at the same time does not want to consume what little food they have. Amy explained that she struggled with how to be respectful and whether to communicate that such offers of food are not required in the United States.

Some organizational staff members, however, did go so far as to try and change refugees' understandings of hospitality. Melissa (CSS) vented during her interview about how frustrating she found one particular Iraqi family's tendency to give her food or drink without asking her permission:

The mother or a woman would bring out something to eat, a snack or a treat and give you something to eat. Because when you have someone in your house, a guest, you give them something to eat. Or, you offer them something to eat by just giving it to them. And I would have to explain that they have to ask me if I would like to have juice or water or whatever. And I said in our country, that is what we do, we have choices. I said that instead of just giving the juice, I don't want to be rude and not drink your juice, but you have to understand that if you asked me I would probably have said no because I just ate. Well and that I'm not thirsty right now, they have to get used to that. So, I had to do that with a couple of families. And it was interesting with the, in particular with the Iraqi mother and her family, she did it for a couple of weeks and I was used to it because of the previous

family, so I had to explain to her...here you have to ask, you have to tell her she has to ask every time. It helps, but she is yet to understand how we are different. In this story (which was actually much longer in the interview), Melissa repeats again and again how frustrating it is that she cannot seem to make the Iraqi woman and her family understand that in the United States, appropriate hospitality involves asking whether someone wants juice or food before it is offered. Then later, when asked to describe a positive communication interaction, Melissa details a time when she took her brother with her to visit a Turkish refugee she was helping and “they were very nice and I had taught her how to ask if you want, you know, if you want some juice so she was fine with that.” So, to Melissa, her success in teaching this Turkish family how to offer hospitality was a positive victory. Thus, in this context, different organizational workers responded differently to the hospitality of refugees by welcoming it, by being uncomfortable with it and by actively seeking to change it.

### **Communicating Workplace Culture**

The final context in which some organizational workers struggled with whether and how to communicate with refugees about cultural differences centered around American values of work. Kim (CSS) explains:

Well depending on what country they come from, the job culture can be totally different. So you really have to teach them on the, we’ve done whole courses... just learning about how you go about getting a job, how you function on a job. What the rules are on a job. You can’t just not show up if you are sick, you have



to let someone know. You can't just leave when you're tired. All kinds of things.

Job cultures are different I guess all over the world.

But while this sense that some refugees lacked an American "work ethic" was seen as a difference in work cultures by Kim, other organizational staff saw differences in work attitudes as a function of refugee's histories. David (CAP) explains that some refugees would prefer to stay on public assistance programs (like Welfare), saying, "Well, if I was getting bombed at home, and I had to flee my country, getting a check in the mail for doing a little bit of work on the side is great." James (CAP) agreed, staying:

So, basically if you are not working, if you are Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, you have to be doing certain things. You have to do volunteer work and you have to dedicate a certain amount of time to the job search. And the goal eventually is to get you working. The issue we're seeing now is a lot of families who just stay on that assistance forever. They figure it was harder in Iraq. Here all I have to do is do some volunteer work and come to a class, and I still get a check every month. That's the good life. That's enough for me. And I try to convince them, no.

But while both David and James understand why, given the abuse and violence many refugees have faced, that living on public assistance may be a reasonable goal for some refugees from their perspective, it is their job as workers at Community Action Partnership to teach refugees that they must not live that way. As David concludes, this can be a very difficult process:

So, trying to convince them that “no, it is important to work, if you’re going to be fully accepted, fully contributing, you have to work.” And we have a lot of success getting folks working. But, that’s one of the populations that’s proven, it is really difficult to get into their minds and say no, switch how you view work and what it can do for you. It is hard enough to try to explain to someone who speaks English and doesn’t want to work, let alone someone where you have language barriers and cultural barriers.

As part of their perceived calling to communicate American cultural knowledge to the refugees they serve, my organizational participants often expressed that their desire to intervene to “liberate” refugees from their established national, ethnic, religious or other cultural practices existed in tension with their desire to respect cultural traditions and their lack of knowledge about how to address these issues in empowering ways. As a result, communication’s role in intervention and liberation remains a tensional site for my organizational staff participants.

### **Seeking Understanding and Protecting Privacy**

Fourth, the organizational staff participants that I interviewed expressed a tension surrounding an appropriate balance between dialogue and privacy. While organizational workers often sought to understand refugees’ histories and experiences, both to improve the provision of services and to grow to know them better as people, organizational workers struggled with how to know what to ask, how to know how to ask, and when such questions might violate refugee privacy or force refugees to relive painful

memories. Moreover, issues of language and translation complicate the balance between dialogue and privacy further by altering to whom personal information must be disclosed.

### **Seeking Understanding**

Many of the nonprofit organizational staff members that I interviewed spoke of seeking dialogue with their refugee-clients. In particular, the workers expressed that learning more about their refugee-clients' histories and experiences helped them to be more effective service providers. For instance, Angela (CAP) explains that part of what makes Community Action Partnership successful is that "our family service workers will do a lot to ask open ended questions of our families about what their priorities are and who does what in their family, and they kind of get to know that on their home visits... So, they know their families very well."Correspondingly, when asked for what organizational workers can do to improve their communication with their clients, Michelle (CSS) responded, "I think that get to know them is very important. Know their culture, to know the people they are. And how do they look at things." Stephanie (CAP) even argued that it was important for organizational staff workers to build in purposeful evaluation, asking their clients for their ideas for improvement. She explains, it is critical to "rememb[er] to ask 'how is this going from your perspective and what else can we do as we move ahead?' You know, to not just rely on the system, but to talk to the experts, and the experts are the immigrants and refugees themselves." This dialogue with refugee-clients allows organizations like Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership to serve their clients in more meaningful ways.

Organizational staff members also expressed seeking dialogue with refugees as a way to learn from refugees and their experiences and to grow to know them better as people, not just as clients. When asked what he enjoyed most about communicating with his clients, Christopher (CSS) responded, “just talking to them and getting to know them.” Similarly, when Kim (CSS) spoke about learning about her Muslim clients’ histories in particular, she said, “I wish I could let everybody know that when you meet somebody and get to know them as a person, it is just wonderful, you know.” Lisa (CAP) summarized this sentiment when she claimed:

I enjoy the people that I meet, and like finding out about people, like where they came from. I’ve like learned so much and like I’ve really broadened my perspective. It’s like I can go many places and just by going to work and by hearing all of their stories and stuff it is kind of like I am traveling. So, that’s what I like, the people that I meet. No matter how stressful or frustrated I get, that’s what makes it worth it, the people.

Thus, in addition to providing better services, many organizational staff sought to learn more about their clients because organizational staff members enjoyed knowing them more fully as people.

One organizational worker, however, did mention that he felt, at times, as if some refugees were too open with him. Jason (CSS) indicates, “I find that... they trust you and will tell you anything, more than you want to know. You know, about their family situation and their money situation or whatever, and it’s like, (laughs), but that’s okay. You know, that’s fine. And I think that that’s, they want to.” In the end, however, despite

the fact that he heard more at times than he wanted to know, Jason summarized that he still valued his conversations with his refugee-clients because of the ability of that knowledge to help him “to make a difference or contribute to somebody” in a meaningful way.

### **But, How and What to Ask?**

While seeking an understanding of their refugee-clients’ lives and perspectives was generally seen as valuable, several organizational workers I spoke to struggled with how to ask their clients for personal information and with how to know what to ask so as to gain helpful information without forcing refugees to needlessly relive traumas from their home countries. For instance, Michael (CSS) describes his struggle to know how to ask his refugee-clients for information he needs to help them. Michael explains, “So often when you’re communicating with refugees, you can’t ask general questions, open-ended questions, ‘cause they’re not exactly sure what you’re looking for. The more specific you can get with your questions to extract the information you’re looking for, the better.” When I asked for an example of a situation in which this affected his communication, Michael furthered:

So much is lost when you have people who don’t understand the culture and they might not understand exactly what they should be telling you. Going back to the Burmese refugee camps, the vast majority of them are living with sicknesses, illnesses, injuries. If they haven’t had medical treatment in years, there’s no big deal with that ‘cause they’ve figured how to live with it. Everybody I know has some kind of an issue that they’ve just been living with. It doesn’t occur to them,

hey, I could easily get treatment for that and I can get that through Medicaid, so I should tell this guy about it. So they won't tell you about things.

In this example, Michael indicates that many Burmese refugees are living with long-term medical problems that they acquired when they lived in refugee camps, but they do not know enough about what is treatable in the United States to bring them up to a case worker. Further, if a case worker were to ask a general question, like “do you need medical treatment for any conditions?,” the refugee will likely answer no because they do not think of a chronic illness as treatable in the same way that a sudden acute illness might be. Therefore, unless the case worker has a particular reason to suspect a particular illness, he or she might not know what to ask the refugee about. As a result, some refugees are needlessly living in pain due to this uncertainty about what to ask.

Not only can the structure of questions determine whether the organizational staff person is able to garner helpful information, but the source of the questions (i.e. who is asking) can impact the refugee's willingness to be open. Stephanie (CAP) described that her staff learned through trial and error that American standards of confidentiality could be counterproductive for refugee-clients. Stephanie explained that her staff wanted to understand whether Community Action Partnership's programs were seen as useful and helpful by their refugee-clients. To allow the refugees to be honest, Community Action Partnership sent different employees to their house than the case workers they typically interacted with. The goal was to allow the refugees “to be more comfortable making anonymous comments” (Stephanie, CAP). The result, however, was that:

[It] was much harder, especially in our Arabic speaking community, where that relationship they had built with their advocate, they really weren't comfortable talking about that relationship with someone else. And so, the intent was to give them greater comfort, but actually the end product was that it was not as comfortable for them. And that was not something that we had anticipated.

So, Stephanie found that her Arabic speaking clients were uncomfortable being open about their relationship with their case worker when a third party was sent in to ask them about it. As a result, "We had to make some accommodations... We did not have the identical person that they worked with call them. We had one of the women who was more of an elder in the community who was a long standing staff person, there was a greater comfort talking with her" (Stephanie, CAP). Even with these accommodations, Stephanie found that "it was slightly less comfortable for them" than she had hoped, and that her refugee-clients would have preferred to speak directly to their case workers about any faults they saw in the program.

While some organizational staff reported not knowing how to appropriately ask refugees about their experiences and perceptions, others still described being unsure as to what to ask refugees so as to show interest in their personal experiences and histories while simultaneously not forcing them to needlessly relive traumas. Christopher (CSS) explains that one of the families he worked with was an Iraqi family and "to be a refugee, to be a refugee your life's got to be in danger. So, I'm sort of, I'm not going to ask them right out "why are you a refugee?" but I'm sort of wondering." He knows that they must

have been in danger for the United States government to grant them refugee status, but he does not know specifically what that danger was.

Moreover, Melissa (CSS) echoes this sentiment when she explains that she knows little about the background of the refugees she serves in terms of where they have lived or under what conditions they might have lived when they escaped their home countries. However, she feels as if having that knowledge might help her to better serve her clients, because living conditions for a Burundian refugee who flees to another war-torn African nation might be very different than for an Iraqi refugee who is able to relocate to Jordan before moving to the United States:

For example, the Burundian family for example, they were in Burundi and then in the United States. They were in some other location as a holding location. . . The woman from Iraq, she was in Jordan before she got here, and you know Jordan isn't necessarily a wealthy country or a poor country, but I'm sure that the refugee conditions may have been much better, much more favorable there, for example, than for the family from Burundi or whatever. And I think that if volunteers were more aware of where they had been prior to coming to our program, then for someone like me, I would be able to say, Okay, what strategy would I use to help teach or whatever the case might be. What method would I want to use to help them get acclimated or to help them learn the language or whatever?

Despite this desire for knowledge, Melissa immediately follows her statements by saying that she would not ask the refugees themselves because "if they don't want to talk about it, I'm not going to make them. I just hope they'll bring it up."



Finally, one case worker specifically mentioned both wanting to know and not wanting to know a refugee family's history because he was afraid that the refugee may have been involved in perpetrating violence (or in supporting politically anti-American factions) in their home country of Iraq. Christopher (CSS) indicated:

I'm sort of wondering because I knew, from what I've read, that they could be Christians, which used to be acceptable but is not any more in Iraq. And they could have worked with Saddam, but that's something that I am not too thrilled about it that's what it was. Or, they could have worked for the US, like as Interpreters or something. So, that's something I'm trying to find out without asking them, you know what their situation is, why did they have to leave? Or somewhere after a few months, religion came up, when I said, "you guys are probably Sunni right?"... They said their dad was Sunni and the mom was Shia, and I knew right away that was the problem. That used to be acceptable, but not anymore. So, that was a good reason compared to, you know, working for Saddam or something. So, that made me feel better about helping them.

In this case, though Christopher is relieved when he learns that this family had not been supporters of Saddam Hussein, he purposefully did not ask directly about their history for fear that they were. This fear, in addition to case workers' concerns about forcing refugees to relive uncomfortable histories, limited openness between workers and refugee-clients.

### **The Legitimate Desire for Closedness**

In addition to not knowing what to ask or how to appropriately ask it, organizational staff members described times in which refugees' expressed a desire to not share their personal information, backgrounds and or histories with nonprofit organizational staff members. For instance, Michael (CSS) admits that for many refugees who have experienced persecution in their home countries, the refugees have developed a legitimate desire to not share their personal feelings and experiences with those they perceive to be authority figures. He illustrates by saying:

In their country, people come to them and demanded money and threatened them and maybe take them away for a couple of days. But even the ones who aren't afraid of that here, who understand our police system, can still be horrified of being kicked out of the country and not having their citizenship application approved, a mark on their record... So sometimes they won't tell us things because they're afraid that somehow telling us means the government will find out. Sometimes like you said, we're an authority figure.

While Michael understood the refugees' desire for privacy to protect themselves from potential persecution, he expressed his frustration that this privacy limited his ability to help.

Furthermore, organizational staff members described facing difficulties in protecting that privacy due to language and translation issues. For instance, Michael (CSS) explains that when asking refugees about health issues, many refugees, particularly female refugees, are uncomfortable disclosing health information to male translators, especially if those translators are not from their same faith background:

We have to be very careful about the gender with interpreters and that also applies for a lot of cultures and it's not just making sure you have a female interpreter or a female going to see the doctor - if you want to get any kind of information that's beyond superficial, for whatever reason, you should be gender-specific and if you can be specific to the religion of the person if you're dealing with an Iraqi.

Unfortunately, Michael explained that finding faith-specific (e.g. Sunni or Shia) and gender-specific translators was not always practical for every refugee medical appointment.

Additionally, David (CAP) explains that many refugees have strong cultural stigmas against mental health help, saying:

Nobody wants to admit to any counseling. Everybody does, coming from Iraq, coming from Africa - a lot of the Africans that we get are torture victims. All the women are rape victims. A lot the people coming to us need - I mean a lot of them have experienced horrors and I think they have demonstrated the capacity to prove that they are under threat of persecution if they haven't already experienced persecution, so by and large, it is a population group that pretty much that needs counseling and by and large, they're coming from countries where that's not really an okay thing.

The problem is that in order to receive that counseling, refugees typically need a translator present (or need to speak to a counselor who speaks their language). And, as Michael noted above, they may not be comfortable unless that counselor (or translator) shares their gender and their faith background. However, most translators that share the

refugee's faith, gender and language background also share these social stereotypes against counseling. The result, according to David is that, "there are times when you figure somebody is probably not even giving you accurate information just because an interpreter is there." This means that many refugees do not receive the mental health help they need due to legitimate concerns for privacy.

The lack of culturally and language appropriate translators creates another privacy problem for refugee families in that case workers at Community Action Partnership and Catholic Social Services both describe occasionally having to rely on refugee children "especially if they have been here a while and they've been going to school" to translate for their parents (Lisa, CAP). This relationship can be problematic. As Angela (CAP) indicates, "We try not to communicate with older children in the families to tell their parents things, but sometimes that does happen because that's who the family uses to tell them things. So, especially health that is a very sensitive thing." David (CAP) continues that while they try not to allow children to translate for their parents, he is sure that at times case workers are unable to get accurate information because the family relies on their children to translate for them when no other culturally appropriate translator is present.

Overall, the organizational staff participants that I interviewed expressed a tension surrounding an appropriate balance between dialogue and privacy. While organizational workers often sought to understand refugees' histories and experiences, both to improve the provision of services and to grow to know them better as people, organizational workers struggled with how to know what to ask, how to know how to ask, and when

such questions might violate refugee privacy or force refugees to relive painful memories. Moreover, issues of language and translation complicate the balance between dialogue and privacy further by altering to whom personal information must be disclosed.

### **Respecting Uniqueness and Needing Uniformity**

Finally, the organizational staff members I interviewed spoke simultaneously to their desire to acknowledge and respect the uniqueness of each refugee family they served and to their need for uniformity among refugees due to logistical realities. Moreover, while some volunteers and workers spoke to wanting to respect the unique practices of their refugee-clients, they were often unsure as to how to best do that.

### **Accommodating Uniqueness**

Initially, both Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership staff members genuinely attempt to respect the uniqueness of the refugees they serve in terms of language, culture and individual histories. For instance, Stephanie (CAP) claims, “We try to make sure that we have our materials and application and those types of things translated into a number of languages so they can read it firsthand.” One afternoon when I visited the Community Action Partnership’s lobby (May 11, 2011), I found that they had documents related to their Center for Refugees and Immigrants available in the lobby in English, Spanish, Arabic, Swahili, Vietnamese, Russian and Karen (Burmese). Furthermore David (CAP) told me that his staff was seeking to translate documents into Kurdish to accommodate the Iraqi Kurds who are currently being brought into the Nebraska community. In this way, Community Action Partnership attempts to respect the uniqueness of the various refugees they serve, acknowledging that not all refugees can or

should speak English when they arrive in the United States.

Angela (CAP) continues that her staff seeks to “embrace all families’ backgrounds whether it be ethnic or different religions or you know any kind of diversity they have” saying “they all have strengths” that can be integrated to make the Nebraska community stronger over time. In order to best embrace these differences, Heather (CAP) explains that:

Most of us try to do some sort of just basic research about those cultures’ cultures so to make sure we’re not ever going to do something to offend those families.

And, you know, we have four different African tribal cultures right now, and all of them are a little different, they all practice things a little different, so we have to make sure that we are really conscious of that through research and then also try to integrate those cultures into our program.

Thus, by researching the different cultures of the refugee families that they serve, Community Action Partnership attempts to respect and maintain their unique strengths by integrating those differing cultures into their resettlement programs. For example, Stephanie (CAP) explains that food and hospitality play a central role in creating a sense of community in several Arabic-speaking cultures. As a result, she explains “Of course, culturally appropriate food is always provided at everything. We certainly know that it is key, key in many cultures to share information over food.” Though providing culturally appropriate food may seem at first glance a minor accommodation, it is symptomatic of a larger feeling that respecting unique cultural practices allows nonprofit organizational staff to serve their clients in more meaningful ways.

Kim (CSS) similarly explains that Catholic Social Services tries to tailor their programs to the backgrounds and expectations of their refugee-clients. Kim explains:

We do get some refugees who are highly educated. And you know that with the Iraq war and stuff going on there, and a lot of those people could not go back to Iraq at all, you know the Christians who are persecuted. And then there are other countries in the Mid East around there, that their experiences are so different than if you take some of the African countries or the Turks or something that, you know, from Russia or things like that. They come and we have to know which expectations they are coming with. And that has a lot to do with it.

Melissa extends this sentiment that programs must be tailored to respect refugee's unique backgrounds when she argues:

I guess I would think that part of it may have had to do with their exposure to whatever the learning they might have had in the refugee camps where they were at. With the Turks for example, they may have come through Jordan whereas the Burundian family may have come through Zimbabwe or Egypt, for example, and I don't know what level of teaching they are receiving in their camps.

As a result, John (CAP) summarizes the idea I heard articulated by organizational staff at both organizations when he claims:

Never treat people in a generic sense, in a generic fashion. People are individuals. You have to engage with what they have to say and try to figure out their particular individual needs and concerns, or you're not likely to be successful. You can't force people into the cookie cutter and you have to respect those

cookies. I think one of the things we sometimes do, and I can understand it because of the pressure of numbers, is treat everybody exactly the same. You're "this case" so we will put you in "this category" into the program, in just the same way as we do with everyone else. But that's not the real world; people are not really like that. I think that kind of overly broad-atized approach is hard on people and is ultimately unsuccessful.

Ultimately, the organizational staff members I spoke to overwhelmingly saw the value in respecting and accommodating the unique cultures, languages and backgrounds of their refugee-clients.

### **But, How to Best Respect Uniqueness?**

Despite the value that many organizational workers placed on respecting the unique culture, linguistic and historical backgrounds of their refugee-clients, volunteers at Catholic Social Services specifically spoke to their concern that they did not always know how to best honor cultural uniqueness. For example, Amy (CSS) described that:

For Christmas I wanted to get them a gift and I asked the volunteer coordinator what would be appropriate, so I got them a food basket, but I didn't know what foods they could or couldn't eat. But, they were Christians, so I assumed that they could culturally, that they could eat anything that we did. But, I wasn't sure.

In this case she wanted to provide a gift that would respect their cultural practices, but was not sure what foods would be acceptable as a gift to her refugee-clients.

Additionally, in one instance, Christopher thought he had a fairly complete understanding of his client's religious background, so when one of their friends was over



at the house, he attempted to make a joke about their religious observances.

Unfortunately, that joke did not translate well. He explains:

Like they have friends, one time they had a couple over there when I was there, a couple from Iraq, but the wife wasn't wearing a head scarf. So, I was saying you must be Christian. But, they said no she is Muslim. So, then I was joking around, and I wouldn't necessarily do this with anybody, but these guys I've gotten to know well enough to joke around with them, so then I said, "bad Muslim." Well, the husband knew English... And he said, no she is good she prays a lot and stuff. So then I say why doesn't she wear a head scarf? Well, it turns out they are Kurds, like in Turkey where they don't wear the head scarves. They're a different culture within the Muslim. Then she was concerned, because she didn't know English, so I told the guy to tell her I was just joking. But, so that was interesting. You don't think about stuff like that, within Iraq there is quite a bit of difference just within its own country. .

Though Christopher meant his comments as a joke, by not recognizing the differences present among refugees even within the same country (e.g. the difference between Shia Iraqis and Kurdish Iraqis), he offended them while jokingly trying to demonstrate his understanding of their cultural practices.

### **Needing Uniformity**

Finally, though the organizational workers spoke to the value of respecting and protecting the differences of refugees through their organizational programs, they simultaneously admitted that due to logistical reality they often needed to treat all of their

refugee-clients in uniform ways. When I asked Stephanie (CAP) if there were any downsides to attempting to respect each refugee-client's uniqueness, she responded, "It is labor intensive, certainly. There is no question about that... So, in that sense, it isn't as cost effective as maybe some other things."

Even if organizational staff did have the ability to treat each case uniquely, moreover, Kim (CSS) acknowledges that training each staff member and volunteer to have a complete understanding of each refugee's unique cultural history would be difficult. She explains, "The major problem with the Catholic Social Services is just time-wise trying to get people trained and the materials they need when the volunteers are generally very busy people anyway, so their time is limited." As a result, Kim admits that training volunteers has to be time-sensitive, limiting the ability of Catholic Social Services to train their volunteers to the uniqueness of each situation, and leading them to favor instead a uniform training session.

Further, even though both nonprofit agencies explicitly try to recognize and accommodate the language differences present in their refugee-clients, Michael (CSS) indicates, it "has been trying to find enough translators, you know, and that's just always been the case. We may, we have two case managers, they speak different languages, but even so, when you've got over 200 refugees ... [he trails off]." Thus, limited resources (in this case, a limited number of full time case managers) limit the ability of Catholic Social Services to provide unique language accommodation for all of their refugees.

Finally, when classes are offered for resettled refugees (whether they be English language classes, job search classes or cultural orientation classes), it is hard for the

instructor to teach to a wide variety of personal backgrounds simultaneously. Michelle (CSS) explains:

For example, if I were teaching about locations, I would say on, under, over, in, next to, and the next, I would try to start with that again the next week and build on that each week. And with the Burundians I would come by and on week four we were still on in, over, at, on and that sort of thing. Whereas with the Turkish family, I would say “put the book on the table,” and they knew what I was talking about by week 2.

Melissa quickly acknowledged that this difference was likely due to the fact that Turkish refugees were often educated and literate in their home countries, while Burundian refugees rarely were. But, while she understood why these refugees learned differently, she found it very difficult to accommodate all of their learning differences while still covering required material in her English language classes. Thus the organizational staff members I interviewed spoke to a persistent tension between their desire to acknowledge and respect the uniqueness of each refugee family they served and to their need for uniformity among refugees due to logistical realities.

Therefore, based on the responses of the fifteen organizational staff members interviewed, there were five primary tension clusters which characterized their experiences, including: (a) tensions of knowledge and expertise, (b) tensions of empowerment and bureaucracy, (c) tensions of intervention and “liberation,” (d) tensions of seeking understanding and protecting privacy and (e) tensions of respecting uniqueness and needing uniformity. After exploring the answers to research question

three in the subsequent chapter, I will return to these themes in my discussion in Chapter

7.

**CHAPTER 6: RESEARCH QUESTION 3 RESULTS**  
**REFUGEE PARTICIPANTS' AND ORGANIZATIONAL STAFF MEMBERS'**  
**COMMUNICATIVE RESPONSES TO BOUNDARY SPANNING TENSIONS**

While the previous results chapters focused on the major communicative tensions experienced by refugee participants and organizational staff members (paid and volunteer) in refugee resettlement organizations, Chapter 6 focuses on the communicative responses of both refugees and organizational staff members to those tensions. The responses present are notable both for how refugees and staff respond to the tensions they had described, and for when they chose not to respond. Following this elucidation of emergent themes, I revisit and elaborate on these findings in Chapter 7.

My third research question asked: How do both organizational staff and refugee-clients communicatively respond to these tensions in refugee resettlement organizing? To best answer this question, I will first examine the communicative responses described by my eleven refugee participants. Based on the responses of the refugees interviewed, there were five primary responses employed by refugee participants to communicative tensions present in their interactions with organizational staff, including: (a) accepting the tensions and contradictions, (b) rationalizing or excusing the tensions, (c) ignoring, avoiding or quitting the tension-provoking communicators, (d) engaging in information seeking behaviors, and (e) engaging in teaching behaviors.

Second, I will detail the communicative responses described by my fifteen organizational staff participants. Based on the replies of the organizational staff participants interviewed, there were five primary responses they used to address communicative tensions present in their encounters with refugee-clients, including: (a)

training their staff, (b) interacting respectfully, (c) accommodating differences, (d) disavowing power and expertise, and (e) enforcing penalties.

### **Communicative Responses by Refugee-Clients**

As the refugees who participated in my study detailed the tensions and contradictions they experienced in their communicative encounters with nonprofit resettlement organizational staff, I asked them how they had responded in each situation. I also asked refugee participants how they had responded more generally to diverse and competing communication pressures (for instance, between a desire for openness and a desire for closedness). I found that refugee-clients employed five primary responses to perceived tensional communication with organizational staff, including: (a) accepting the tensions and contradictions, (b) rationalizing or excusing the tensions, (c) ignoring, avoiding or quitting the tension-provoking communicators, (d) engaging in information seeking behaviors, and (e) engaging in teaching behaviors.

### **Accepting the Tensions and Contradictions**

The single most frequent strategy employed by refugees as a response to perceived tensions or contradictions in communication from organizational staff was a strategy of accepting the tensions or contradictions. Refugees reported frequently not responding to try to ease or affect the tensions they experienced, choosing instead to accept them as a necessary part of working with organizational staff in nonprofit agencies. For instance, when asked how they responded to the tensions they described in their interactions with organizational staff, many refugees simply replied with some version of “I didn’t” (Sara, Female, Sudan). When I pressed further as to what that meant,

Ali (Male, Iran) explained, “We needed what they were providing – food, clothes, housing assistance, employment assistance – we would put up with pretty much anything.” Similarly, when I asked Amare (Male, Ethiopia) how he responded when his family felt as if organizational staff from Community Action Partnership were overly involved in his private life (specifically after his wife’s previously described joke that she was pregnant), Amare responded, “No, no because more important for me was that our needs were met.”

The response displayed by refugees took this strategy of acceptance further by adapting to and accepting organizational tensions and contradictions even when it was not in their best interest to do so. Anai (Male, Sudan) explained that due to their need for the services that nonprofit refugee resettlement organizations are providing, many of his refugee friends would “say yes to, you know [the organizational staff], to when they have no clue what’s going on.” By choosing not to respond to tensions and contradictions present in communication with organizational staff, refugee-clients may preserve the availability of services from that organization, but at the same time, subsume their own legitimate competing interests under the interests of the organization designed to serve them.

### **Rationalizing and Excusing Contradictions**

The second strategy employed by refugees as a response to perceived tensions or contradictions with communication from organizational staff was a strategy of rationalizing or excusing the contradictions as misunderstandings or as evidence of the care or compassion of the organizational staff involved. For instance, Mamadou (Male,

Senegal) described several incidences in which organizational workers approached him conversationally with demeaning and/or derogatory stereotypes about life in Africa (including assumptions that all Africans lived in grass huts or the assumption that Africa contains only small rural villages rather than large metropolitan cities). Mamadou characterized his response as one of excusing their behavior, saying, “I guess this is good. Maybe they just don’t know.” When I asked him if he ever felt frustrated or upset with their incorrect assumptions, he furthered, “not with me. That may happen with some people but with me, I’ve been to different places and you try to understand, you know understand people. And I just don’t-. Sometimes I just laugh and think maybe they really need to know many things.” In this way, Mamadou excuses their behavior as a simple lack of information about life on the African continent rather than more actively responding.

Nyanath (Female, Sudan) also described responding to contradictions and tensions in her communication with organizational staff through a strategy of excusing behavior due to the possibility of misunderstanding. Nyanath explained, that while she relied on communication from organizational workers to help her get her family enrolled in necessary services in the community (like housing assistance and Medicaid), in one situation she described how her organizational staff case worker denied her food stamps application because she did not comply with all of the complex paperwork rules. Nyanath indicated:

She [the case worker] said, okay, “We cut the food stamp because she didn’t offer all the requirements for the paper.” And, I don’t know how to read English at that



time. So, I say, okay, you didn't give us food stamps, what can we do? So, one of my sons, he's in high school, he go and work on farm. Work in the mornings, he worked in the evenings like after he came home from school, from like three o'clock until like midnight. When he came home at midnight, he would just need to be up until like four o'clock in the morning doing his homework. And he'd go to school in the morning and it was very, very hard for him.

After describing further how difficult this was for her son and her family, she explained that eventually a different case worker did help her family to get onto food stamps. She told me that the first case worker needed to spend the time to really "know what kind of client you work with." But, when I asked her how, if at all, she had responded to this contradiction between the need for knowledge and the lack of dialogue, Nyanath indicated, "Maybe they didn't understand your system. I don't blame her, maybe she think about me and maybe I don't know." Essentially, Nyanath indicates that she attributes the difficulty she experienced to a possible misunderstanding.

This same pattern of frustration with what the refugee perceived to be tensional communication followed by rationalization was displayed by Anai (Male, Sudan) when he described that based on previous communication encounters with staff at Community Action Partnership, he expected them to be able to help him find medical insurance while he was in college. However, because he had timed out of the program (had been helped for as long as the program allows refugees to be enrolled), their strict rules made him ineligible for insurance assistance. He explains his interaction with one staff person:

So I went down to talk to them, like, you know, “I’m a student and I do not work. I do not have insurance, so could you guys help me?” Cause, I been going through some medical problems... so, “could you guys help me? At least during summer to have insurance or, to some sort of have.” And that lady was “nope, we can’t help.” Like <laughs in disbelief> I can’t say anymore because that was all. I can talk and talk, yet, it can’t change.

While Anai was certainly frustrated with these rules, in the next breath he rationalizes this denial of aid, saying, “You know, she was probably thinking I was just joking, or, maybe being lazy, or liking to go make some money or not like to work. Or, I may not be a student or something, yeah.” Interestingly, Anai does not arrive at the same rationalization (that he has timed out of the program) that the workers have. Instead, he excuses their failure to help not as an instance of rules/control, but rather as a misunderstanding. In this way he resolves the conflict by excusing it as a simple misinterpretation of his situation. Thus, he ironically affirms the rules by not challenging them.

The refugees I spoke with also rationalized and excused contradictory and tension-filled communication from organizational staff as evidence of the staff’s underlying care and concern for the refugees they served. After describing how organizational staff members had a tendency to ask for overly-personal information about her and her family, Sittina (Female, Sudan) told me that she responded to their invasions of her privacy by reminding herself, “It shows how important they were emotionally and that showed me their level of concern.” Mamadou (Male, Senegal) likewise attributed

contradictions between empowerment processes and controlling rules to the staff's dedication, saying, "Maybe they were just doing their jobs well." Zhara (Female, Iran) agreed in her response when dealing with tensions generated by the disconnect between actual knowledge and purported expertise in one organizational staff member when she summarized:

I think... even if they don't do anything for you, they care. They are, they follow what you say they try to listen to you, even if they can't do anything, they send emails and they say I see this I think this is the problem, blah blahblah, so you think they care you feel as they care.

So rather than criticizing this organizational staff member for purporting to be an expert and then being unable to answer her questions, Zhara is thankful to the staff member for listening to her at all. Thus, refugees who employed this strategy did not condemn organizational staff members or the organization more broadly when tensions and contradictions arose in communication; instead, they excused or rationalized those contradictions as misunderstandings or as evidence of the staff's care for the refugees they served.

### **Ignoring, Avoiding or Quitting the Tension-Provoking Communicator**

A third communicative response chosen by the refugees I interviewed was to remove themselves from communication with the person or organization they perceived as provoking the communicative tensions or contradictions they experienced. In its most mild form, this strategy involved simply ignoring communication that was problematic. For instance, Amare (Male, Ethiopia) described being inundated with mail from

Community Action Partnership, saying that the frequency of knowledge sharing was at times problematic. When asked how he responded to the situation, Amare indicated, “you look at them like you look at any mail you get and you disregard some of them. So, I didn’t mind.” Specifically, Amare indicated that just like any other mail, you simply toss some away. By disregarding some of the communication, Amare was able to bring the knowledge shared by the organization down to more manageable levels.

Refugees also reported selecting this strategy of ignoring (or choosing not to engage problematic communication) in verbal interactions with organizational staff. After being asked what she perceived to be culturally insensitive questions about the father(s) of her children, Nyanath (Female, Sudan) explains that she “just keep quiet. I didn’t like to talk because I thought, maybe she sees something wrong.” By choosing not to answer the questions asked about her children’s parentage, she essentially combats what she perceives to be the invasive questions by ignoring them.

Anai (Male, Iran) chose a similar strategy of avoiding when he found himself in a difficult cultural interaction. He described to me a situation in which one of the female Catholic Social Services volunteers who was helping him leaned in and hugged him. He was stunned because:

In Iran, you’re not supposed to, a man and a woman are not supposed even touch each other. That’s not something that I mean, it just the way that I was raised for 25 years. So I was thinking that that’s just not something that should happen because I can get in trouble with the cops. So I just backed off, instinctively.

When I asked him to elaborate on how he responded to this situation, Ali said, “I didn’t know what happened. I didn’t know how to explain what happened. I just took a step back.” Rather than verbally confront this culturally unwelcome form of communication, Ali backs off to protect his personal space. In this way, he essentially avoids future touching but opts out of a more direct form of communication about the incident.

At times, this avoidant response manifested as the decision to no longer pursue communication that seemed unhelpful in favor of seeking help elsewhere. For instance, Amare (Male, Ethiopia) describes a situation in which his case worker told him that Community Action Partnership could provide housing assistance for his family, but then when he called the office, the program secretary told him no. He explains, “I don’t remember exactly, but she told me a set of criteria, and unless you meet these, it is kind of impossible. I was kind of discouraged. My advocate, our advocate told me that there is room, but this secretary told me it was not possible.” When I asked how he responded to this contradictory communication, Amare responded, “We got support from our church, so I did not pursue.” So in this way, Amare resolves the conflict by choosing to not engage in it any longer.

This strategy was similarly chosen by Nyanath (Female, Sudan) in response to the previously described sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of a volunteer from Catholic Social Services. Rather than report the behavior to the organization or to the police (which she explained that she was uncomfortable doing for cultural reasons), she said, “After that day, I didn’t really pay him attention for anything. I just like if he asked me if I need help or anything I say “No! I’m Okay” because I don’t really want to interact with

him. So, we survived.” In this way, Nyanath responds to the abusive power dynamic by avoiding interaction with the man who had harmed her.

In its most extreme form, the response of avoiding the contradictory or problematic communication led refugees to quit the organization entirely. Ibrahim (Male, Sudan) explains that at times, refugees choose not to accept services from either Catholic Social Services or Community Action Partnership because “the system itself keeps them away.” Muna (Female, Afghanistan) agreed when she explained that many of her friends from Afghanistan, who had become frustrated with the overly controlling and bureaucratic practices of the empowering organizations choose to leave. Muna explains, “That’s one of the reasons that you see a lot of, a lot of the people I’ve known through the years, moved away from here because the help is so limited.” While Muna’s friends choose to move to communities with nonprofit organizations who were able to offer them more help (at least in their eyes), some refugees resorted to even more extreme strategies. Omar (Male, Sudan) explained that after failing to meet the strict requirements of both Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership to find a job in a relatively limited amount of time, “many of us are in danger of losing hope, the solution of which is resorting to street lives of stress, hopelessness, and despair.” When I asked him to elaborate as to how he responded to what he saw as the strict and unfair job requirements communicated by the agencies, he continued, “Many refugees have either committed suicide or have become homeless including me.” Thus, in the extreme, not only did Omar describe quitting the programs which required him to find work, he resorted to homelessness and poverty rather than continue to try to work through the system. In this

way, opting out of the organizations that present tensional communication may resolve the contradictions, but does not necessarily help the refugees. By choosing to ignore, avoid or quit communication from and with nonprofit organizational staff, refugee-clients may minimize or avoid tension-filled or contradictory communication, but at the same time, may harm their own legitimate interests (to report sexual abuse or to not be homeless) by opting to not interact with an organization that could provide them with help.

### **Engaging in Information Seeking Behaviors**

Though accepting, excusing and avoiding the tensional communication with nonprofit organizational staff were by far the most commonly described response strategies, a few refugees opted for more active communicative responses. One such strategy, albeit only described by a single refugee, was engaging in additional information seeking behaviors. The refugee who employed this strategy attempted to resolve problematic communicative relationships by asking for additional information from organizational workers. This additional information, then, allowed her to protect her own interests in the face of problematic communication. For instance, after describing her confusion with all of the requirements for a savings assistance program communicated to her by a Community Action Partnership worker, Zhara (Female, Iran) said she responded by “ask[ing] many questions. Okay what is this thing, what is this thing, what is this thing? So we can know everything. A lot of times it’s when we’re not aware of something that we get into trouble.” By seeking additional information, Zhara attempted to resolve the tension between empowerment and control by empowering herself to

understand and avoid problematic controls. Zhara elaborated that she had found that the best way to manage communication with organizational staff was to, “No matter what you do, ask a lot of questions about what are the rules behind it.” Similarly, after describing a time in which she felt that a Community Action Partnership worker had taken advantage of her not knowing that as a new American resident she could legally obtain credit cards and bank accounts (things she was unable to do in Iran) to encourage her to sign up for their financial programs, Zhara explained that she learned to always ask questions not only of the organizational staff, but of those outside of the organization to verify information, saying, “yes we’re trying to be very picky and very careful.”

Of course, such an information seeking strategy relies both on knowing what to ask and knowing whom to ask in order to gain needed information. Furthermore, information seeking strategies could be time intensive (especially if organizational statements have to be confirmed by those outside of the organization). Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that so few refugees reported following this strategy. However, information seeking is a more active way to manage organizational tensions than simply accepting, excusing or avoiding. In this instance, Zhara uses her own voice to ask questions and to protect herself against what she sees as problematic controls or misinformation in her communication with Community Action Partnership but continues to engage in communication with the organization as she expresses her own questions and concerns.

### **Engaging in Teaching Behaviors**

Finally, a few of the refugee participants I interviewed explained that they attempted to respond to the tensions and contradictions they experienced in their



communication with organizational staff and volunteers by seeing those interactions as opportunities to educate their organizational counterparts about their backgrounds, experiences and cultures. In general terms Mamadou (Male, Senegal) said he responded to problematic communication from organizational staff simply, saying, “Every time I have the opportunity, I try to talk to people.” For instance, Anai (Male, Sudan) described a situation in which Community Action Partnership staff began sending his mother threatening letters because she had not been filling out her housing assistance forms appropriately. This was particularly frustrating for Anai, not only because the rules were complex, but because his mother did not read English, which the letters were written in. As a result, Anai reports that he had to call up the case worker and “explain to her what that’s all about or, you know, how important it is” that someone is “really is there to help” his mother. When I asked why he called them up rather than just answering the letters by providing the housing documentation, he continued, “because then they wouldn’t learn.” So, in this way, Anai responds by attempting to teach the case worker how to more effectively interact with his refugee-mother.

After expressing her frustration at culturally-based miscommunications and misunderstandings (for instance in which her father was disrespected by a case worker), Muna (Female, Afghanistan) similarly spoke to her own efforts to help raise cultural awareness at Catholic Social Services. She said, “I go around and talk in [Catholic] churches about religion and culture.” When I asked her why she sought to do that, she furthered, “I mean the community has to be educated, that’s where you can start.” By educating individual Catholic parishes about her experiences as a woman in Afghanistan

and about religious and cultural practices in Afghanistan, Muna believed that Catholic Social Services and the larger Nebraska community would learn to communicate more effectively with the refugees who resettle here.

Putnam (1986) argues that individuals who experience organizational contradictions can most positively respond by merging the contradiction into a creative alternative action. Some of my refugee respondents attempted to do this by seeing tensional communication as a site for education, and by attempting to improve the nonprofit organizations serving them by teaching the staff about their lives. However, while positive, this strategy places the burden for education (and educating) on refugees rather than on the organizational workers who purport to be experts on refugee resettlement.

Overall, then, the five primary responses employed by refugee participants to communicative tensions present in their interactions with organizational staff ranged significantly. While the predominant strategies confirmed the contradictions and the organizational system that produced them either by accepting them outright or by rationalizing them, other strategies rejected the contradictions and the system that produced them by ignoring, avoiding or quitting the communicative encounters. A few refugees, however, responded by more actively protecting their own interests, either by engaging in information seeking behaviors to lessen the organizations' dominance as "expert" or by engaging in teaching behaviors in an attempt to improve the cultural competencies of those organizational staff who they interacted with. Further reflection on the effects of these various strategies will be discussed in Chapter 7.

### **Communicative Responses by Organizational Staff and Volunteers**

As the organizational staff who participated in my study detailed the tensions and contradictions they experienced in their communicative encounters with the refugee-clients they served, I asked them how they had responded in each situation. Additionally, I asked organizational workers and volunteers how they had responded more generally to diverse and competing communication pressures (for instance, between a desire to empower and a need for bureaucratic rules). I found that organizational staff employed five primary responses to perceived tensional communication with refugee-clients, including: (a) training their staff, (b) interacting respectfully, (c) accommodating differences, (d) disavowing power and expertise, and (e) enforcing penalties.

#### **Training the Staff**

The first and by far the most dominant strategy described by organizational staff to perceived tensions in communication with refugee-clients was an internal strategy of training. Whether the tensions experienced were between empowerment and bureaucracy or intervention and liberation, between understanding and privacy or uniqueness and uniformity, organizational workers and volunteers overwhelmingly claimed to respond by engaging in more and better organizational training. Interestingly, this strategy does not respond directly to the refugee-client with whom the interaction has provoked the tension, but rather adopts the conduit lens and presumes that communication would go more smoothly if only organizational workers could only say it more clearly or in a more culturally sensitive way.

For instance, when asked how she responded to the tension between communicating with refugees as a way to liberate them while still respecting their cultural practices, Angela (CAP) said, “We definitely do ongoing training and we take the staff to a lot of immigration conferences and ethnic conferences. In fact there’ve been trainings we sent our staff to throughout the area, like... to a language institute that is that something we definitely do.” Presumably, Angela believes that the information learned at these conferences helps staff decide how and when to communicate with refugees about American cultural practices. Kim (CSS) likewise reported when I asked how she decided when to communicate with refugees about sex and gender relationships in the United States that “The orientation they have at Catholic Social Services, I think, is very in depth... and it has how to teach a lesson and what a lesson should include and all that kind of stuff, so they’re not just thrown in with nothing.” When I pressed as to whether the training specifically dealt with communicating about sex or gender, she responded “no, but it was generally helpful.”

In a similar vein, when asked how he decided when to seek dialogue with his refugee-clients and when to respect their privacy, Jason (CSS) responded, “Well they, they did train you on what you can do and can’t do. You know some things are like, you know don’t give them money or have sex with them or anything or proselytize. It’s CSS, but I’m not there to convert them or anything.” Again, though this is not a direct communicative response, he seems to believe that his training helped him to understand when he should refrain from talking about certain subjects (like religion) with the refugees he served.

To follow up on the numerous reports of training, I began asking organizational staff what was covered in the training that they felt helped them to respond to these tensions more fully. Melissa (CSS) explained:

They do a pretty good job of providing literature and information on the country that you will be working with. So, before when I worked with the Iraqi family or the Burundian family or what have you, they provided me with the literature on the region if you will and they also provided me on how many would be coming into an area at a particular time or the what the population would be or whatever. They were really good with that.

Melissa was not the only organizational volunteer who felt that Catholic Social Services did a good job of providing historical and contextual information about the refugee families being served. Christopher (CSS) indicated, “the CSS lady sat down with me for a couple of hours I think, just kind of going over there, just introducing me to their situation there, I was asking, part of it was me asking, how did they live? How does it work with the money and stuff?” He alluded to the fact that this information helped him to understand the refugees he was helping.

Community Action Partnership staff member Stephanie (CAP) described taking this cultural education of their workers and volunteers a step further, explaining:

Well, one of the things that is mandated both by our Community Action Partnership organization... is to really move staff along the Cultural Competency spectrum. They really expect them to move way past awareness and accommodation to really celebrating what is interesting and unique about each

and every culture... So there's lots of formal and informal opportunities to learn about different cultures and different religions.

By moving past awareness and accommodation, Stephanie explained that staff members can better respond to the unique information needs and cultural practices of the refugees they serve.

While generalized historical and cultural information may have been helpful, specific advice related to communicating with refugees seemed less so. Jennifer (CSS) who actually occasionally taught the volunteer training for Catholic Social Services said:

Basically I do a general cultural kind of training, cultural competence, you know. These are does and don'ts. What you do what you don't do when you're working with people with different cultures. These are things to be mindful when you are communicating with someone different than you, who speaks a different language than you do.

But, when I asked Jennifer to elaborate on some of the specific advice she gives for communicating with the refugees, she continued, "just some of the simple, and I'm not an expert when it comes with communicating with refugees, and I don't spend a lot of time communicating with them, but I tell my volunteers to talk slow, to listen." Though speaking clearly and listening are likely good pieces of advice no matter who one is communicating with, this lack of any specific cultural/ intercultural communication information was noteworthy, especially given her claim that she was teaching cultural competence in communication. Amy (CSS) confirmed this sentiment, when she agreed "there's a person who, a volunteer who is over the volunteers... but she doesn't have a lot

of knowledge about all of the cultural things.” In fact, even with all of the talk of cultural communication training, none of the training described seemed particularly related to inter-cultural communication. Furthermore, when I attended a volunteer training session at Community Action Partnership, I was struck by the generalities and vagaries given as advice for communicating with cultural difference (e.g. “listen” and “talk slowly so you are understood”). So, while training may be designed to help organizational staff communicate more successfully with refugee-clients, the training itself may not specifically deal with communication and culture in any in-depth way.

To improve their communication with refugee-clients, Community Action Partnership employee Stephanie spoke specifically to their attempts to use feedback from the refugees themselves to improve their training processes. She explained, “So, we have training about that annually, both from external sources. But, we also try to integrate as much as we can of learning from our staff and our participants.” When I asked specifically how they learned from their participants, Stephanie (CAP) furthered:

I think that that is important so that people are always evaluating our system on, “Are we erecting barriers?” “Are we making this as welcoming an environment as we possibly can?” “What are the needs that we have, perhaps, haven’t identified that we need to address?” So, there is always a communication feedback loop where staff are asking families, “What do you need?” “Are we doing anything that is making it harder for you to be a part of it?” you know so that, both again formal surveys and formal opportunities as we go through that annual self-

assessment. But, there are also informal opportunities that happen on a regular basis.

Unfortunately, she did not offer any specific examples of ways in which that feedback was used to change the program. Perhaps the feedback is used in meaningful ways and if that feedback loop were truly happening, it may well help ameliorate the perceived tension between communicated knowledge and purported expertise that some refugees felt in both organizations by allowing refugees to share their experiential expertise openly with staff. However, the persistence of that particular tension demonstrates that not all refugees felt this feedback loop functioned as strongly as Stephanie did in her own training programs. Thus, while more and better training was the most frequent response cited by organizational staff to perceived tensions in communication with refugee-clients, the usefulness of that training was not universally agreed upon. This means that while these organizations may seek to mediate the refugee resettlement experience in the United States, their boundaries as organizations may not fully be open to the reflections and advice of refugees that would make that mediation most meaningful.

### **Interacting Respectfully**

While the most frequent response strategy reported by organizational staff did not involve directly responding to the refugee-clients, the remaining four strategies described did depict communicative behaviors for managing tensions in the interactions themselves. In response to tension-filled communication with refugee-clients, some of organizational staff members reported intentionally interacting respectfully with refugees as a way to manage that tension. For example, Jennifer (CSS) explained that she managed



the tension between dialogue and privacy through respectful interaction, saying, “I think that treating refugees with respect and dignity will go a long way. I think treating anybody with respect and dignity can go a long way. I think you’ll get a lot back. Someone who respects you.” To Jennifer, interacting respectfully encouraged refugees to be more open in their communication with her.

Similarly, Heather (CAP) explained that when she communicated with refugees that resisted Community Action Partnership’s program rules, she found that the best advice for responding was, “Treat them like you want to be treated. And treat their children like you would want your children to be treated, and make them feel like this is just like walking into a friend’s home, because if they don’t feel comfortable and they don’t feel safe, then it is going to be very hard to work with them.” To Heather, treating refugees as a staff member would want to be treated allowed staff members to explain the rules in more respectful ways. John (CAP) agreed, saying that Community Action Partnership was more successful in its attempts to empower refugees when the refugees, “see I’m not just doing the job, but I care about you and I care about your success. What I’ve seen is that when people see that I believe that, they’re going to work harder, and they’re going to cooperate better, and our whole relationship will be vastly better.” Notably, to both Heather and John, the ideal outcome for communication with their refugee-clients is compliance. Heather and John respond by interacting respectfully because they believe that refugees will “cooperate better” and be easier to work with as a result.

Because this idea of respectful interaction was repeatedly raised, I sought to understand more specifically what communicative behaviors it entails. According to Heather (CAP), communicating respectfully begins by interacting with someone in their own language. She indicates that when balancing the tensions surrounding communicating knowledge:

We try very hard to find someone who can comfortably communicate with them so that they feel like they're worth something. You know, I don't speak any other languages, so I know how I would feel if I was in another country and nobody even tried. You know, this is their home now, so we need to make them feel at home.

By noting that they provide Cultural Orientation booklets in refugees' native languages (e.g. Arabic or Karen), Lisa agrees that Community Action Partnership tries to ameliorate tensions surrounding knowledge provision by making language-appropriate resources available.

Second, organizational staff and described respectful interaction as characterized primarily by listening. Particularly, organizational workers saw a listening as a way to promote empowerment and to decrease tensions surrounding experiential versus organizational expertise. For example, Jennifer (CSS) states that when refugees feel as if Catholic Social Services is not addressing their specific needs:

Well, I think what we do is that we listen to them, and you know, we don't, we don't kick them out. We listen. Just like you do to anybody else. When a person feels like they are heard, no matter what country they are from, I think that is an

empowering thing. If a case worker is available, the case worker will go down. If the refugee resettlement coordinator is available, the refugee resettlement coordinator will see them.

By listening, Jennifer believes that Catholic Social Services the staff make refugees feel valued and empowered, even if the staff do not directly respond to their requests.

Similarly, John (CAP) explains that when his refugee-clients are upset because though rules at Community Action Partnership seem unfair to their particular situation from their perspective, he responded:

You have to observe, you have to see what's going on... listen to the voice, try to interpret the feelings and emotions as well as the actual issue, and then respond on that basis. But like I said if there's any strategy that I could make a point of talking about in a competent way, it is listening, observing, and having respect for others.

Again, by listening, John argues that nonprofit organizational staff can minimize the tensions present in their communication with refugees by validating the refugees' emotions without altering organizational policies or practices.

Finally, when I asked Heather (CAP) for examples of respectful interaction, she described respectful interaction as being an explicit commitment to nonjudgmental communication. She indicated that the way she responded to her refugee-clients' concerns for privacy was by emphasizing that she would not judge them, but that she needed to learn about their personal situation to serve them better. She explains, "Yes, we do home visits and site and if, you know, there's an issue as far as them not feeling

comfortable meeting in their home, we can meet them in public places or whatever. But, we really encourage our families to let us come to their homes. We let them know we're really not there to judge them you know, just to help them." By emphasizing her agency's nonjudgmental perspective, Heather hopes to minimize the perceived tension between openness and privacy. Overall then, nonprofit organizational workers managed the communicative tensions present in their interaction with refugee-clients that by emphasizing interacting respectfully with their clients.

Interestingly, however, this conceptualization of "respectful interaction" presumes a universal human understanding of respect. By that, I mean that most of these characterizations of interacting respectfully boiled down to some version of "Treat them like you want to be treated" (Heather, CAP). While such Golden Rule inspired statements seem helpful at first, there is no recognition that the way(s) in which respect is expressed might vary across culture or class or gender or status. Essentially, workers presume that the style of communication that would work for them (as relatively educated, middle class people living in a country with extended family, without being subject to violence, etc.) might not be most appropriate for those with different histories, traditions or experiences. In the end, the language of "interacting respectfully" attempts to humanize the basically bureaucratized interactions of refugee resettlement, but does not seek to connect to the other at an individual level. Interacting respectfully does not call for the organizational staff to learn the unique preferences of the refugees they serve, and more notably, interacting respectfully does not call for staff to think differently about

themselves or the bureaucratic structures in which they work. It is simply enough to enforce the rules through “respectful” communication.

### **Accommodating Differences**

The next direct strategy employed by nonprofit organizational staff to manage tensions in their communicative interactions with refugee-clients was a strategy of accommodating refugees’ language and cultural differences. As John (CAP) summarized, most of the contradictions or tensions he experienced and interactions with refugees occurred because of bureaucratic pressures to develop standardized procedures. He indicated:

I think one of the things we sometimes do, and I can understand it because of the pressure of numbers, is treat everybody exactly the same. You’re “this case” so we will put you in “this category” into the program, in just the same way as we do with everyone else. But that’s not the real world, people are not really like that. I think that kind of overly broad-atized approach is hard on people and is ultimately unsuccessful.

When organizational staff tried to communicate with the airy different refugee populations in peoples in the exact same ways, John noticed that tensions surrounding uniqueness and uniformity of became particularly problematic. In order to respond to those tensions, John believed, “You have to engage with what they have to say and try to figure out their particular individual needs and concerns, or you’re not likely to be successful. You can’t force people into the cookie cutter and you have to respect those cookies.”

To do this, both Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership workers first reported “the need to have culturally sensitive interpretation and translation services” (James, CAP). Angela (CAP) noted that Community Action Partnership sought to respect the linguistic complexity of their clients by hiring a multilingual staff and translating documents and recruitment materials. Beyond simply hiring translators, however, Michael (CSS) emphasized respecting refugee uniqueness by providing translators who are gender and religious matches to their clients, saying, “You just have to do the best you can matching up genders when you feel like you’re going to need to do that and matching everything else in terms of correctness on whatever it is.” In order to ensure that translators are culturally as well as linguistically appropriate, Community Action Partnership hires many people from the refugee communities themselves to serve as translators for both Community Action Partnership and the larger community. James (CAP) explains:

Another thing we have housed at Lincoln, Community Action is Language... if you go to a Hospital or doctor’s office, and there somebody who can’t speak English with a patient, there will be a Language Link interpreter there. So we employed through that, we hire independent contractors who are immigrants and refugees who speak, I think we have, you know, we have 25-30 languages represented and we have over 200 clients.

When interpreters were not available, moreover, Community Action Partnership and Catholic Social Services both described having documents available to help their organizations’ receptionists respond to refugees in basic ways. Jennifer (CSS) clarifies,

“We also, have written out some general responses in their language for the front desk. Because, you know, there’s always someone here from the team, but if one of us is in a meeting and/or half of us are out, then it is up to the front desk to respond.” By having some basic language-appropriate responses, the front desk workers can help communicate information to refugees even when their case workers are unavailable.

This accommodation for language differences however extends beyond just translation. For instance, Lisa (CAP) explains that she accommodates her illiterate clients by drawing pictures. She indicates, “Sometimes I can pick up on when people are pretending they can understand you.” When that happens, she said:

I draw pictures... You just need to think about what you’re saying I guess, and have you, like draw if you have to. Write things down, that’s important, because sometimes it can be hard for people to understand what you are saying, so. Just make sure that they understand any way possible.

Therefore, organizational workers reported accommodating language differences as a way to respond to communicative tensions, particularly between uniformity and uniqueness. Organizational staff also reported accommodating refugees’ cultural practices in order to respond to the perceived tensions of intervention. As part of Community Action Partnership’s educational programs for refugee children, Heather reported that at times her staff had to intervene to teach refugee parents, particularly those from Africa, about appropriate educational attitudes and behaviors in the United States (described in Chapter 5). She then later admitted that those African parents did not always welcome such intervention. When I asked how she responded, she answered:

Most of us try to do some sort of just basic research about those cultures' cultures so to make sure we're not ever going to do something to offend those families.

And, you know, we have four different African tribal cultures right now, and all of them are a little different, they all practice things a little different, so we have to make sure that we are really conscious of that through research and then also try to integrate those cultures into our program

By researching the families' cultures (and by trying not to essentialize all African cultures as the same), Heather attempts to minimize the intrusion of intervention by integrating some of the African families' cultural practices into the curriculum (thus respecting their uniqueness while demanding some degree of uniformity).

Similarly, when John (CAP) described his experience that some female Muslim refugees were uncomfortable being open with him because of his male sex, he explained that he responded by trying:

To exercise a lot of respect for the cultural requirement, and as possible, to maintain the relationship at as professional a level as possible. You know, if you keep things on a very professional level, you're more likely to be able to make them feel comfortable, and then over time I think that tends to open communication up more anyway, because they begin to feel less threatened, and then just a little more willing to communicate about things than they were before.

In this way, by respecting their cultural requirement for distance from a male case worker, John believes that he is able to balance dialogue and privacy by encouraging



them to open up to him more because he initially respected their desire for professional (which he contrasts with personal) communication.

Overall then, Heather (CAP) summarizes that to minimize tensions in their communication with refugees, organizational staff must be “aware of what kinds of cultures are in your area, what their needs are, and what their cultural ideas are. Be very mindful of their religious thoughts and beliefs, their educational thoughts and beliefs” and accommodate those beliefs through their communication.

### **Disavowing Power and Expertise**

To respond to tensions surrounding their positioning as experts on American cultural life and to avoid blame for rules or processes that refugees found burdensome, organizational staff members also described responding to communication with refugee-clients at times by disavowing their own power over or expertise in a particular situation. Heather (CAP) reported that she often told volunteers that she trained to not ever “make a client feel like you are better than them or you are dictating to them... our agency motto is people helping people.” This sentiment, that organizational workers are just people with limited power and expertise, was strategically reinforced at times by agency workers in their interactions with refugee-clients. For instance, after describing how refugees would often ask her questions about life in Lincoln that she did not have answers to, Lisa (CAP) began preempting the questions by stating at the beginning of Cultural Orientation Sessions, “In the communities, there’s still a lot of things that I don’t know.” By explicitly disavowing her expertise (or limiting her expertise) before an hour long class in

which she will explain the way things are in Lincoln, she simultaneously performs as an expert, but then offers herself an out if a questions arises that she cannot answer.

Similarly, Michael (CSS) told me that one of his primary jobs is to help refugees fill out legal paperwork when they first arrive in the United States. In fact, the Catholic Social Services refugee intake checklist involves quite a few legal tasks, including “Explain the use of the AR-11 Form [Department of Justice],” “Discuss procedures for family reunification and the eligibility requirements for the P-3 or VISA 93 category resettlement,” and “Have applicable clients complete and sign Selective Service form” (Checklist, 2011, p. 1-2). However, while providing refugees such legal information is part of his job, Michael explained that he didn’t want to be blamed if the refugees did not get their desired outcome (e.g. did not get family reunification visas). As a result, Michael said, “I figure it’s a small thing and in most situations, you’re best to reassure somebody and explain, look, I have no power on anything surrounding about like legal issues, but I’m just trying to help you figure it out where you’re at.” In all reality, Michael really does not have any legal power over decisions like resettlement visas, but it would be easy for refugees to believe so since it is his job to explain the visas to them. Thus, by disavowing any power on legal issues, Michael attempts to mitigate the tension between apparent knowledge and implied expertise. In this way, it seems that some organizational workers are uncomfortable presenting themselves as experts when they know their own informational and power limits.

Another way that some organizational staff members tried to mitigate tensional communication with refugee-clients was by appealing to impersonal rules as a rational

for unpopular actions. For example, Heather (CAP) described that as part of their educational programs for refugee children, Community Action Partnership workers often had to tell parents that their children were not achieving required proficiency standards in educational performance. However, because American standards for educational performance are frequently different than the standards refugees may have experienced in their home countries, Heather indicated that some parents would become hostile with her or her staff for not respecting their ideas. When that happened, Heather responded:

We can compile all of that information and sit down with them and it's very black and white. It's not just "here's what we think." It's what the testing is saying. . .

We have lots of tools in place with our assessment systems and our questionnaires and our tools that we use in order to guide us in that process.

By using seemingly impartial tools like assessment questionnaires, parents are more easily convinced that the educational standards are not the whim of the nonprofit staff person, but are rather impersonal rules out of their hands.

Jason (CSS) similarly appealed to the idea of impersonal rules that are out of his control when clients revealed to him personal information about medical or job-related problems. As a volunteer, he told refugees that he was required, by his training, to report the problem to his superiors and he could not help them himself. He illustrates, "I would report it to Lynn.... So, if somebody has a serious problem, I pass that word along and then butt out. And I think it is good to have people trained like that." By appealing to the impersonal rules of his training, he could protect himself from the overly-open communication from some refugees and could avoid having to provide information or

services beyond what he had volunteered to do. Ultimately, then, by disavowing power or expertise and by appealing to rules and procedures, organizational staff tried to manage tensions between knowledge and expertise, empowerment and bureaucracy and dialogue and privacy.

### **Enforcing Penalties**

Finally, at an extreme, some organizational staff resolved communicative tensions with those they saw as perpetually problematic clients by penalizing the clients and removing their services. Though Jennifer (CSS) explained that at Catholic Social Services, “we don’t, we don’t kick them out,” any particular volunteer or worker could refuse to continue to work with a difficult client. For instance, Melissa (CSS) told a story of a time in which she felt like the husband of an Iraqi refugee she was helping kept treating her in a disrespectful and threatening way. She explains:

I guess I personally got the impression that he was upset with me just being in the house alone with his wife to influence her one way or the other... every time I had a conversation with her or tried to have a conversation with her, he would be right there looking dead in my eyes, in my eyeballs, thinking are you going to say anything off the cuff to have me throw you from my house kind of look... So, I just stopped going after a while.

In this situation, which Melissa admitted was not common of her experiences with refugees more generally, Melissa decided that rather than speaking to the wife about her husband, or speaking to the husband directly about his control of his wife, she managed

the tension she felt between herself and the husband of this Iraqi woman by no longer working with the family.

While Catholic Social Services did not remove clients from its program, Community Action Partnership staff indicated that in extremely tensional circumstances they would refuse to allow a noncompliant refugee to remain in their programs. James (CAP) explained:

For some folks, for a lot of folks, it just really comes down to the person you are.

If they'll listen, or if they have decided from the get go that they are not going to listen. If they have decided not to listen, those are clients that we just don't continue to work with. We just say, "You're not ready and this is the drill here.

Unless you can contribute and commit to improving your situation, we're not going to do it for you." And some people just, we just decide to part ways.

Though "we just decide to part ways" is a kind euphemism, it means essentially that some people are thrown out of the program if they do not or cannot comply with strict rules over which they may have little input. But, rather than recognizing that some people may not meet rules to attend English classes or get jobs quickly because they have transportation issues or young children at home, James continues that:

You can go to the People's City Mission and you can find a group of Sudanese gentleman who are you know, that are drunk out of their minds every single day.

They stumble around to the "U" stop, and then to our property. Those are people who are more than likely, they'll never ever succeed and will die very young.

Unfortunately, under Community Action Partnership's discourses of empowerment, if these men have failed to succeed, it is not because of underlying hurdles beyond their control (being subject to terrible violence in their home countries, mental or physical illness, structural barriers to finding employment, etc.), it is because they haven't tried hard enough – they are lousy drunks. Under that set of assumptions, it is fine to reconcile the disconnect between forcing empowerment through strict controls by kicking those who fail to comply out of the program.

Overall, then, the five primary responses employed by organizational volunteers and staff to communicative tensions present in their interactions with refugee-clients also ranged significantly. Ironically, the predominant response cited was “training,” despite the fact that there was not always consistent evidence offered that providing more advice to “talk slow” (Jennifer, CSS) helped improve communication with refugees in any meaningful way. Furthermore, while communication strategies of interacting respectfully and accommodating differences seemed to validate refugees as people who were active agents in their resettlement process, communication strategies that disavowed power (despite the case workers' very powerful positions relative to refugees) or worse that enforced penalties by withdrawing from noncompliant refugees resolved tensions by minimizing refugees' problems and concerns. Further reflection on the effects of these various strategies will be discussed in Chapter 7.

## **CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

In this chapter, I begin with a review of the overall study to this point. I then place the communicative tensions revealed in the experiences of refugee-clients and organizational staff in conversation with one another in order to illustrate how the experiences of both groups can help better inform the processes of boundary-spanning communication in mediating organizations. Throughout this section, I develop both theoretical and practical contributions of this study. Finally, I identify both limitations and opportunities for future research which evolved from this study.

### **Revisiting the Study**

Issues of refugee resettlement have been studied by sociologists, anthropologists and members of the medical community. The resulting research illuminates issues such as the difficulty of providing adequate medical and mental health-care to resettled refugees, the challenges refugees face in attaining work and the ways in which communities may be affected by and affect the refugee resettlement process. However, relatively little attention has been given to issues of refugee resettlement by communication scholars generally or organizational scholars in particular (for exceptions, see Chapter 2). This is an important gap in organizational communication research. Given the rapidly growing presence of refugees and migrants worldwide, the potential harms experienced by both these refugees and by surrounding communities if refugee resettlement is managed poorly, and the critical position of refugee resettlement organizations in mediating the resettlement process, organizational communication scholarship has much to offer. At this point, however, little is known about the actual

communication processes experienced in the day to day encounters between refugees and staff in refugee resettlement organizations.

Furthermore, voluntary non-profit organizations play a critical role in mediating the transition of refugees into their new host communities (Huntoon, 2001). Specifically, mediating organizations are those organizations “standing between the individual in his private life and the large institutions of public life” (P. L. Berger & Neuhaus, 1977, p. 2). The vast majority of the available literature on mediating organizations, however, can be found in the field of sociology rather than communication. Nevertheless, mediation is fundamentally a communicative phenomenon, as social services are provided in voluntary mediating organizations through communication between nonprofit workers and clients. More critically, for voluntary mediating organizations to create empowering spaces, communication is central.

Unfortunately, when communication is mentioned in discussions of mediating organizations generally or of refugee resettlement organizations in particular, it is often treated as a tool to be used by refugee resettlement organizational staff to gain compliance from refugee clients. However, this treatment of communication presumes that refugee-clients are both passive and delinquent in their communication and fails to examine the ways in which both refugees and organizational staff experience and respond to communicative tensions in more complex ways. Thus, in this study I sought to fill these gaps by critically exploring how refugee resettlement organization staff members and refugee-clients describe the communicative tensions which emerge when they



interact with one another. Furthermore, I explored how both employees and refugee-clients engaged with those tensions.

### **Tensions Experienced By Refugees and Staff in their Interactions**

My first research question asked: What tensions do refugee-clients in mediating refugee resettlement organizations experience in their communicative interactions with nonprofit employees? Based on the responses of the eleven refugees interviewed, there were five primary tension clusters which characterized their experiences. First, refugees described tensions surrounding *knowledge and expertise*. Refugees readily admitted a need for basic knowledge of goods/services as well as practical and cultural information, especially about life in the US. However, refugees simultaneously portrayed a sense that they needed to be listened to, particularly as they shared their unique personal experiences and explained how knowledge fits their particular experiences/context. Second, refugees depicted tensions of *empowerment and control*. Refugees expressed a strong appreciation for the ways in which communication from workers gave them a chance to start over in the United States and to become self-sufficient. Simultaneously though, refugees conveyed a strong discomfort with the ways in which those services are bounded by complex, confusing and often “unfair” rules, bureaucracy and control. Third, refugees described tensions surrounding *rights and power*. Refugees appreciated communication from organizational staff which helped them better understand new rights and freedoms in the United States. However, at times this new sense of empowerment disrupted family dynamics by redistributing power from men to women and from parents to children. Furthermore, reliance on organizational staff for empowerment opened some

refugees up to abusive relationships. Fourth, refugees experienced tensions of *openness and closedness* as refugees needed to be open about their past histories and experiences in order to receive help from organizational staff, but also expressed a desire to remain closed to organizational staff both to protect privacy and to avoid discrimination. Finally, refugees described tensions of *integration and separation* as they both desired to become integrated into American society and to maintain culturally distinct practices from their homelands. In particular, this tension often manifested itself as a generational one, as different family members sought varying degrees of integration and separation.

My second research question asked: What tensions do workers and volunteers in mediating refugee resettlement organizations experience in their communicative interactions with refugee-participants? Based on the responses of the fifteen organizational staff participants interviewed, there were five primary tension clusters which characterized their experiences. Initially, organizational staff described tensions surrounding *knowledge and expertise*. Organizational staff often enjoyed communicating knowledge both about goods and services and about American culture to their refugee-clients, and often positioned themselves rhetorically as experts on American life. At times, though, this expert positioning was problematic, as refugees sought information the organizational staff member did not have, provoking frustration and disappointment. Second, organizational workers recognized tensions of *empowerment and bureaucracy*. Strict rules, which were often out of the hands of the individual workers, functioned in both helpful and harmful ways, helping workers create fairness and uniformity but also constraining what they are able to do. Furthermore, some workers struggled with the

understanding that empowering refugees meant allowing them both to succeed and to fail on their own terms. Third, organizational staff depicted tensions of *intervention and liberation* in which they struggled with when to intervene to help liberate refugees from repressive or undesirable understandings (of sex/gender, parenting or employment) and when to respect different practices as culturally contextual. Fourth, organizational workers felt tensions surrounding *seeking understanding and protecting privacy* in their conversation with refugee-clients. While organizational workers described wanting to engage in dialogue with refugees and hoping to learn about refugees' histories and cultures, they simultaneously worried that those conversations could provoke painful memories or infringe of refugees' privacy. Finally, organizational workers experienced tensions of *respecting uniqueness and needing uniformity*. While organizational staff desired to hear refugees' individual voices and honor culturally unique practices, organizations also described needing uniformity at times to make service provision to a wide variety of refugees cost effective and practical.

### **Communicative Responses to Resettlement Tensions**

My third research question asked: How do both organizational staff and refugee clients engage with these tensions? Based on the responses of the refugees interviewed, there were five primary responses employed by refugee participants to communicative tensions present in their interactions with organizational staff. First, many refugees described *accepting the tensions and contradictions*, even when they were problematic for the refugees, because the services provided by the organization were so critically needed. Second, many refugees engaged in *rationalizing or excusing* the tensions as

simple misunderstandings or as evidence of the organizational staff member's care for the refugee and his/her family. Third, refugees *described ignoring, avoiding or quitting* the tension-provoking communicators, which allowed them to resist tension-provoking communication, but also removed them from organizational relationships which could provide them with needed services and information. Fourth, one refugee described *engaging in information seeking behaviors* so that she could protect her own interests in light of organizational tensions. Finally, a few refugees engaged in *teaching behaviors* by seeking to educate organizational staff about their experiences, histories and cultures.

Based on the replies of the organizational staff participants interviewed, there were five primary responses they used to address communicative tensions present in their encounters with refugee-clients. First, though not a direct response to the refugees themselves, organizational staff detailed engaging in increased *organizationally-sponsored training exercises* as a way to minimize tensional communication with refugee-clients. Second, organizational staff members described responding to tension by intentionally *interacting respectfully by listening to refugees* and validating their ideas and concerns. Third, organization staff described *accommodating differences* by providing communication in the refugee-clients' native languages and by respecting refugees' cultural practices. Fourth, to minimize refugees' expectations of expertise, several organizational staff members adopted a strategy of *disavowing their own power and expertise*. Finally, in the extreme, some organizational staff sought to minimize tensions by *enforcing penalties* against those they saw as non-compliant refugees by removing those refugees from services or from the program entirely.

While these tensions and responses are interesting in their own rights, they are particularly meaningful when placed in conversation with one another. In the following section, I will revisit five larger tension-clusters in order to gain a richer understanding of the communicative tensions present in boundary-spanning encounters between organizational staff and clients in nonprofit refugee resettlement organizations. Through this discussion, I begin to sketch out the theoretical contours of organizing interaction through tension between refugee resettlement organizational staff and the refugees they serve.

### **Placing Tensions in Conversation**

#### **Knowledge and Expertise**

The persistent tensions surrounding the communication of knowledge and the rhetorical construction of expertise experienced both by refugees and by the organizational staff who sought to serve them highlight the dominance of the conduit understanding of knowledge communication in mediating organizations and the theoretical and practical need for mediating organizations to intentionally adopt alternative communication frames. Putnam and Boys (2006) define a conduit as “a channel through which something is conveyed, such as a tube or cylinder” (p. 545). As Rasmussen (1991) indicates, the conduit metaphor of communication then represents communication “as a simple process of sending meaning, conveyed in words and gestures, from one person to another” (p. 364). Under this frame, meaning is assumed to be easily transferable if the sender correctly encodes the communication by selecting the correct medium and message to send to the receiver (Rasmussen, 1991). Further, this

orientation “leads to the valorization of efficiency and accuracy in knowledge transfer, reducing the role of communication to that which transmits the object of interest” (Kuhn & Porter, 2011, p. 18). Reddy (1979) provides additional detail when he indicates that the conduit metaphor often adopts one or more of the following assumptions:

(1) Language transfers thoughts and feelings from person to person; (2) speakers and writers insert thoughts and feelings into words; (3) words contain the thoughts and feelings; and (4) listeners or readers extract the thoughts or feelings from the words. (Reddy, 1979, as cited in Axley, 1984, p. 429)

These assumptions of transferring thoughts from sender to receiver are dominant in the descriptions of interaction between refugees and organizational staff provided by both sides. This is problematic, in part, because it “sees knowledge as an entity ontologically separate from action (and context), reinforcing a dualism against which many in communication studies argue” (Kuhn & Porter, 2011, p. 17).

Refugees’ accounts of their interactions with staff demonstrate that they primarily perceived the communication from mediating organizations in these conduit terms. Refugees reported needing and expecting communication from the organizational staff to provide them with information about how to access goods and services in the United States and with cultural information about how life in the United States differed from life in their home countries because, as Muna (Female, Afghanistan) explains, “you have questions on everything.” As Sara (Female, Sudan) elaborates, “we didn’t know anything about America, so they help us out with that.” In that way, knowledge was seen as held by the “senders” and transmitted to the receiving refugees.

Similarly, accounts from organizational staff members revealed that they too saw themselves primarily as senders of practical and cultural information they held to refugee recipients. For organizational staff, this was most apparent in the incredible frequency with which they used the word “explain” to describe what they did when they communicated with refugees. For new refugees, much of the explanation they receive is related to basic facets of life in the United States. James (CAP) indicates:

Those first two months that somebody’s here, there’s a lot of hand holding.

Explaining. This is how the microwave works. This is how the refrigerator works.

You have to put meat in the refrigerator. You’ve got to lock your door at night.

This is how you buy a car. This is what to avoid if you buy a car. And those, I think, are so intensive.

Moreover, Christopher (CSS) talks about enjoying this explanatory role, saying, “That is fun, trying to explain different cultures and stuff.” Of course, not all organizational staff enjoyed that explanatory role to the same extent. David (CAP) complains about the difficulty of explaining rules to refugees, saying, “It is hard enough to try to explain to someone who speaks English and doesn’t want to work, let alone someone where you have language barriers and cultural barriers.” Though David certainly did not seek to imply that all refugees did not want to work, he found that those who may not want to work (or at least wanted to delay finding a job) for one reason or another were more difficult to “convince” to work than English speaking American clients. Similarly, Michael (CSS) describes his difficulty getting refugees to understand that they need to coordinate their medical appointments through his office, saying, “It’s harder for them to

understand how things work in general, so it can be harder to explain.” Overall, in both the minds of the organizational staff and the refugee-clients, communication functioned (or didn’t function) primarily in conduit terms.

On face, such a construction makes sense given the context. If workers are perceived to have knowledge and refugees are not, then how could co-construction of meaning possibly occur? However, the conduit metaphor of communication is limiting at best. First, a conduit metaphor can promote complacency and overconfidence among organizational communicators regarding their self-perceived efficacy (Axley, 1984). If one assumes that senders have knowledge and receivers must only unquestioningly decode it, it is “exceedingly easy to fancy oneself relatively expert” in whatever the information being sent is (Axley, 1984, p. 434). This construction of communicator as expert is problematic if and when the sender is not in fact an expert (as most organizational staff could not possibly be expert on all things American).

Second, the conduit metaphor assumes that “When Person X ‘communicates’ with Person Y, basically what is happening is that X is transferring meanings from his/her mind to the mind of Y” (Axley, 1984, p. 435). Putnam and Boys (2006) elaborate, explaining that the conduit metaphor adopts a sender bias and presumes that communication sent parallels communication received. What this means is that the ability of receivers (in this case refugees) to (mis)interpret or appropriate that information given their own personal frames and experiences is entirely ignored. If refugees do not respond to the communication in the way desired by staff, a conduit metaphor assumes the transfer was not successful and more training of staff is necessary to ensure that they



transfer information more effectively in the future. This transfer assumption, therefore would explain why the response of organizational staff to most contradictions experienced in their interaction with refugees was “more training.” This is problematic particularly because research has found that clients in social service agencies do interpret, resist and repurpose organizational messages in light of their own lives (Trethewey, 1997).

Given the desired function of these refugee resettlement organizations is to mediate the transition of refugees into American cultural, economic and civic life, moving beyond a conduit metaphor is essential. For mediation to meaningfully happen, therefore, both organizational scholars and practitioners have to take the potentiality of co-production of meaning seriously. Adopting a metaphoric frame of voice in refugee resettlement organizations creates the potential for mediation to happen in richer and more meaningful ways. As Putnam and Boys (2006) explain, within the voice metaphor, an organization becomes a “dialogic process of social formation” (p. 556). Rather than simply transmitting messages from “expert” staff to “naive” refugees, a voice metaphor presumes that the best way to mediate experience is to engage in a collaborative dialogue with refugees about what information they need and how their unique experiences guide and transform the cultural adjustment process.

Though under the traditional conduit model organizational staff are seen as experts who must impart information to knowledge-less refugees, a voice metaphor takes seriously the role of experiential expertise in mediating communication. Borkman (1976) explains that experiential expertise is “truth learned from personal experience with a

phenomenon rather than truth gained by discursive reasoning, observation or reflection on information provided by others” (p. 446). For instance, in feminist scholarship, Foss and Foss (1994) explain that women’s perceptions, meanings and experiences are taken seriously and valued. Particularly, personal experience, or the consciousness that emerges from personal participation in events, is a legitimate form of expertise. Thus, while staff in mediating organizations may have expertise about refugee resettlement gained from reading about resettlement, observing the refugees they resettle, and talking to refugees themselves, only the refugees themselves have actually experienced the process of resettlement as a refugee in the United States.

In theoretical terms, expert knowledge has traditionally been defined as “more general and objective and therefore more accurate than the subjective knowledge of lay persons” (Caron-Flinterman, Broerse, & Bunders, 2005, p. 2576). In that sense, experiential expertise is typically overlooked because of its perceived lack of objectivity, verifiability, universality, or rationality. However, in their studies of doctor-patient communication in medical contexts, Caron-Flinterman, Broerse and Bunders (2005) found that in lived experience, a knowledge claim is meaningful if and only if such knowledge is useful to the recipient. In that way, doctors may have expert knowledge, but that knowledge is only meaningful and helpful to their patients if its communication exists in dialogue with the patient’s actual experiences with the disease. This sentiment also appears in the refugee resettlement context in the comments of several refugees, including Sittina, (Female, Sudan) who explained that organizational workers “need to listen. They need to understand that I can’t find a job just because they say I should.”

Similarly, Anai (Male, Sudan) argued, “if you can’t listen to your audience, that’s, or your clients, you’re not going to be able to help them.” To these refugees, expert knowledge cannot simply be transmitted by organizational staff. Rather, to really mediate their transition, expert knowledge must exist in dialogue with experiential expertise in order for the expert knowledge to meaningfully help those it is meant to serve.

This understanding of the importance of valuing experiential expertise in mediating communication processes has both theoretical and practical implications for organizational communication and refugee resettlement. Theoretically, the importance of experiential expertise highlights the problematic of voice in mediating organizations. As Mumby and Stohl (1996) indicate, organizational communication as a field is “increasingly characterized by multiple voices that challenge dominant ways of seeing and thinking about organizations and which therefore challenge the implicit rules about who can legitimately construct organizational knowledge” (p. 55-56). Mediating refugee resettlement organizations, at least as evidenced in this study, appear to have implicit rules that position organizational staff as experts on American life and refugees as information-deficient and simple receptacles of expert information. However, this study challenges the practicality and productivity of such assumptions by arguing that true mediating communication can only happen when refugee-clients are also seen as a legitimate source of expertise about their own lives and experiences. Further, this research supports the theoretical development of Kuhn and Porter’s (2011) argument that in organizational communication studies, we must embrace *knowledge as a process* rather than as a finite possession of or output of organizing. Rather than seeing

knowledge as something organizational experts *have*, they argue, “*processes of knowing* see[s] these processes as always embodied, embedded in particular socio-historical settings and communities, and intimately connected to the material forces through which they emerge [emphasis original]” (p. 18). Additionally, Kuhn and Porter explain that understanding knowledge as a process allows scholars to focus on “the importance of communities in shaping what “counts” as knowledge” (p. 20). Future research should continue to identify ways in which mediating organizations can engage with experiential expertise in meaningful ways and could examine in more depth those processes of knowledge that influence mediating organizations. By recognizing and embracing the tensions surrounding expertise and knowledge, mediating organizational communication research could expand understandings of expertise and of the processes of knowledge in important ways.

At a practical level, this increased appreciation for experiential knowledge leads to three suggestions for improving the mediating communication of refugee resettlement organizations. First and most simply, staff in mediating organizations must actively seek experiential expertise from the refugees themselves to understand how their policies, information and programs are being received and understood by the refugees they serve. This means asking refugees openly about how they understand and experience programs, policies and information and actually listening in a meaningful way to the responses. While both organizations currently say they are seeking refugee input on their programs, the refugees I interviewed currently did not feel that their experiences were being heard. As Papa, Singhal and Papa (2005) explain, dialogue will not emerge simultaneously

because people who are poor, disempowered and often isolated are hesitant to voice their opinions. Practitioners hoping to facilitate dialogue must be prepared to encounter hesitations and resistances to engaging in dialogue. As a result, creating a safe and comfortable space for dialogue is critical. One of the ways to do that is described below.

Second, the refugee resettlement organizations should create peer-sharing opportunities in which refugees can gather with other refugees to share their experiences and understandings of life in the United States. Papa, Singhal and Papa (2005) indicate that in their experiences working with disenfranchised groups in Bangladesh, these peer-to-peer discussions can create grounds for meaningful dialogue if the organizational workers recruit one or two participants who they know will be willing to start the discussion by sharing their experiences. If a few refugees “prime the pump” by disclosing their opinions and ideas, other disenfranchised refugee-participants are also more likely to feel safe and to speak (Papa, Singhal, & Papa, 2005, p. 250). This type of peer-to-peer communication was desired by the refugees I interviewed, and it holds at least two clear benefits for the organizations if they chose to use it. First, facilitating such peer communication would allow refugees to share experiential expertise with one another, which would help fulfill their need for practical knowledge and would support the organizational missions to make refugees self-sufficient members of the American community. Second, listening to what refugees say to one another about the transition to life in the United States would give organizational staff a better sense of what types of information are needed for the resettlement transition, and how information is understood, interpreted and enacted by some of the refugees they serve. Thus, listening to

these discussions would allow organizational staff to gain greater knowledge themselves, allowing them to use those examples and ideas in their mediating communication with other refugees in the future.

Finally, this greater appreciation for the voice rather than the conduit metaphor explains why “more and better training” focused on transmitting knowledge more effectively from staff to client will not solve all communicative tensions experienced by staff in their interactions with refugee-clients. Rather than emphasizing talking slow, as Jennifer (CSS) does, training must focus on ways in which staff can seek to understand how refugees interpret and understand the information they are receiving. In the end then, the tensions surrounding communication of knowledge and expertise in mediating refugee resettlement organizations highlights the current dominance of the conduit metaphor in these mediating organizations and the need for a more complex understanding of the multiple voices and expertise(s) present in organizations. By presenting both staff and refugees as co-experts and as co-producers of resettlement knowledge, organizational staff and refugees can communicate about resettlement in more useful ways.

### **Empowerment, Bureaucracy and Control**

Second, the significant tensions surrounding the communication of empowerment through systems of bureaucracy and control experienced both by refugees and by the organizational staff who sought to serve them highlight the problematic generated by expert-led empowerment programs. Empowerment discourses dominate staff accounts of what the mediating refugee resettlement organizations are seeking to accomplish, but

these empowerment practices provoked considerable contradictions through implementation.

This contradiction surrounding the impacts of empowering communication on both organizational staff and refugee-clients should be examined more deeply. Empowerment is widely understood in communication literature as the process through which individuals perceive that they control situations (Bandura, 1997; see Bormann, 1988; M. J. Papa, Singhal, Ghanekar, & Papa, 2000b; M. J. Papa, et al., 2000; Rogers & Singhal, 2003; Shefner-Rogers, Rao, Rogers, & Wayangankar, 1998). Further, Rogers and Singhal (2003) argue that most programs to raise levels of empowerment in a particular group of peoples are essentially communication interventions. However, Bandura (1997) explains, “‘Empowerment’ is not something bestowed through edict. It is gained through development of personal efficacy that enables people to take advantage of opportunities and to remove environmental constraints” (p. 477). Though, while empowerment cannot be decreed upon someone, it is equally unlikely for someone who is disempowered to suddenly define him or herself as empowered. Rogers and Singhal (2003) indicate that “unempowered individuals usually require external stimuli to become empowered... in this instance, the role of the change agent is that of a facilitator, not problem solver, in order to assist and encourage the group/individual’s capacity for self-empowerment” (p. 69).

These two premises, that empowerment cannot be decreed, but that empowerment simultaneously requires communicative facilitation are at the heart of the mission of most human service organizations. As Hasenfield (1992) explains, one of the primary

functions of human service organizations is to “process, sustain or change the people that come under its jurisdiction” (p. 4-5). The refugee resettlement mediating organizations in my study certainly saw themselves as sites for facilitating an empowering change in the refugees they served. However, in order to do that, the organizations placed refugees into “processes, rule systems, and structures that significantly control members’ behavior while seeking to empower them” (M. J. Papa, et al., 1997, p. 220). For instance, strict rules and punishments designed to help refugees find work frequently force refugees to work down in jobs below their qualifications and expertise and often forced female refugees in particular to not prioritize the care of family and children as they would prefer to do. Furthermore, organizational staff members struggled with whether empowerment required them to allow refugees to fail on their own terms (e.g. does empowerment require allowing refugees to make what organizational staff perceived as bad choices?) As a result, these organizations appear to offer refugees a type of emancipation while simultaneously restricting and controlling opportunities in other arenas of their lives. This contradiction similarly generates both theoretical and practical contributions to the understanding of communication in mediating refugee resettlement organizations.

Theoretically, this contradiction demonstrates that the broad communicative definition of empowerment as being in “control of situations” may be problematic in that it seems to indicate a utopian universality of control. In other words, it seems that an empowered person under this definition can control all areas of his/her life. However, in reality, such control is elusive. As refugees explained in their interviews, gaining immediate economic control of their lives (by accepting the first job they could find)



often robbed them of control over their career trajectory and simultaneously removed their control over their family lives. On the other hand, choosing to remain on public assistance (which could in some terms be understood as the refugee being in control by making choices for him/herself) was seen by organizational staff as a failure of empowerment. Thus, rather than emphasizing “empowerment” as a broad and singular concept in which an empowered person has “control,” theoretical understandings of empowerment must seek to recognize multiple empowerments in different life arenas and from different positionalities. Furthermore, those empowerments may function in overlapping and at times competing ways. For instance, Muna (Female, Afghanistan) argued that empowering refugees to integrate into life in the United States by teaching them American cultural values and practices often disempowered refugees to function according to the customs of their own cultural heritage. Similarly, while James (CAP) worried about the failure of empowerment programs when refugees who chose not to pursue more than minimum wage jobs, if a particular refugee is happy working minimum wage, is it not empowering to allow him or her to decide that for him or herself? As a result, future research in mediating organizational communication in particular should seek a richer understanding of how multiple empowerments might function in conflicting and tensional ways.

At a practical level, this recognition of multiple and potentially conflicting empowerments could be included as part of the family assessment and goal planning process to help refugees and organizational staff partner and communicate in more productive ways. As the process currently stands in both Community Action Partnership

and Catholic Social Services, refugees meet with a case worker early in their relationship with the organization in order to identify family needs and goals and to develop plans for achieving those goals. However, in practice, the primary goal of both organizations was to find refugees a job and to refuse to allow them to quit that job once found. As agencies whose funding largely comes from the Federal Government and other donors, this priority is largely beyond the control of individual case workers. However, for many of the refugees, other concerns were primary, including finding meaningful work and finding work that could accommodate their family relationships. Thus, in the family planning process, it would be helpful to identify what refugees' understandings of empowerment are. For instance, asking refugees, "What would it mean to you to be in control of your life?" or "What do you need to be in control of your life?" might help organizational staff understand how empowerment is understood by those they serve. Then, programs could be established which recognize that goals like family and financial stability do not have to be mutually exclusive.

### **Rights, Power, Intervention and Liberation**

The tension inherent in the communication of rights and power in the service of intervention and liberation highlights the false dichotomy in our common understanding between liberation and oppression. Rather, the ambiguities described by refugees and organizational staff about when to and how to talk about rights and power demonstrate that intervention, liberation, and oppression may well be simultaneous and mutually supporting processes.

Much of the tension surrounding rights and power stems from one of the primary struggles of communication ethics – that of universality vs. particularity of ethical and moral norms. Some communication scholars have sought to theorize a universal set of ethical and moral norms – for example values including freedom, equality and self-determination. However, other communication scholars argue that there is “no one universal understanding of what constitutes communication ethics” (Arnett, 2011, p. 45). As Arnett notes, any attempt to construct a theory of ethics is necessarily rhetorical, situated within a given bias and identified as a perspective that gives shape to a particular world. In particular, since most published communication scholarship of the last century has emerged from Western European and American scholars, Western conceptions of ethical standards and the ethical sphere itself have been taken as universal (Cheney, Munshi, May, & Ortiz, 2011). As a result, Wasserman (2006) explains, “insufficient attention has until now been paid to ways in which local knowledges may complicate values that otherwise seem universal” (p. 72). For instance, in a cultural context which values history, tradition, fate and predestination, the “universal” value of self-determination may not be seen as valuable at all.

When local knowledges are not used in the development of “universal” ethical norms, such norms tend to adopt what is normative in the West, creating a “modern west versus the backward rest” dichotomy (Kim, 2007, p. 27). In this context, it is clear how communication about “universal” ethical norms and rights from refugee resettlement organizational staff could be simultaneously liberatory and oppressive. For example, Ibrahim (Male, Sudan) explained, communication from organizational staff designed to

help refugee couples value equality between the sexes in their families (appealing to the “universal” American value of equality) often tore apart family structures and hurt both the men and the women in the relationship in unexpected ways. For instance, the organizational staff’s insistence that women should and do have the right to work in the United States created tensions for families, as men were still expected by many refugee women to be the sole provider of the family’s household needs. As a result, Ibrahim describes, “She keeps her checks for herself... she doesn’t help her husband in the house because it is his right to do everything in the house. But, due to the situation, she needs to help him and he needs her help” (Ibrahim, Male, Sudan). This situation in which women are empowered to work puts strain on families in Ibrahim’s mind by disturbing the traditional balance of power in Sudanese families without equipping the families with the tools to negotiate these new power relationships. Similarly, promoting American value standards on parenting decisions as appropriately universal was described by Muna (Female, Afghanistan) as alienating parents, both from their own children and from their own cultural practices. Further, positioning Western (in this case American) social service workers as the source of “moral” knowledge also allowed some instances of abuse - for instance in the case of Nyanath (Female, Sudan), who was sexually mistreated by a case worker but did not report the mistreatment because she assumed that if a case worker did it, it must be appropriate in America.

As a result, it is easy to understand why some organizational staff members (including Angela and James from CAP) argued that they should not intervene by communicating with refugees about values or rights in the United States. They argued

essentially that, “you have to respect [differences] and go with that because that is their culture” (Angela, CAP). This position is supported in organizational and intercultural communication theory, as Kim (2007) argues that we must seek to “create models that acknowledge differences [in values] without placing them in hierarchy or opposition” (p. 27, see also Arnett, 2011; Cheney, et al., 2011).

However, such a position is not as obviously preferable as it might seem. While it seems easy to say “each person should be allowed to determine their own ethical standards,” this can be undesirable in two ways. First, operating by alternative standards may well place refugees in conflict with laws or social practices in the United States which could cause them to be arrested or otherwise punished. For instance, practices like hitting spouses and children, common in some refugee communities, could well cause a refugee to be arrested and/or lose custody of their children. As a result, successfully mediating refugee resettlement may require, for their own legal protection, communicating with refugees about why not to do those things.

Furthermore, multiple ethical standards cannot always be valued without placing them in opposition. For instance, respecting female subservience in a refugee family may directly oppose an organizational worker’s personal values of female equality and respecting parenting practices from another country may require ignoring physical harm to children. Thus, by respecting the values of the refugee, the organizational worker may have to not be true to his/her own ideologies. As a result, choosing to not communicate with refugees about values in the hopes of not oppressing them may also be oppressive (both of the refugee and of the organizational worker) in its own way.

At the level of practice, resolving the tensions surrounding ethics and values may neither be practical nor desirable. However, Jennifer (CSS) may offer the best advice for managing this tension when she advises her staff to “Know your values and be aware when your values are challenged, and be ready to talk about them.” By seeking to help their staff better understand their own value positions and backgrounds (e.g. in Arnett’s 2011) terms making explicit the biases and positionalities from which our ethical conceptions evolve), staff members will be in a better position to recognize when refugees’ values differ because of the different biases and positions held by refugees and to engage in conversation with refugees in which both sides could learn more about the values and practices held by each side.

### **Open or Closed, Dialogue and Privacy**

The tensions surrounding the desirability of openness and closedness, dialogue and privacy problematizes our popular understandings surrounding the desirability of dialogue, openness and self-revelation. Tardy and Dindia (2006) introduce the importance of self-disclosure by arguing:

Self-disclosure, the process whereby people verbally reveal themselves to others, constitutes an integral part of all relationships. As stated by Rubin, ‘In every sort of interpersonal relationship, from business partnerships to love affairs, the exchange of self-disclosure plays an important role’ (1996, p. 168, As cited in Tardy & Dindia, 2006, p. 229).

In the context of mediating refugee resettlement organizations, the self-disclosure of refugees is seen by both refugees and organizational staff as key to developing the service

provision relationship between organizational staff and their refugee-clients. For instance, Amare (Male, Ethiopia) indicates that his family benefited from openness with his case worker from Community Action Partnership, saying, “We talked about our culture, where we come from, our background, stuff like that. She was interested in our background as well. That helped us to know, helped her to know us better.” As a result, Amare perceived that his family received better information and services, because the services were tailored to their needs. Similarly, Angela (CAP) explains that part of what makes Community Action Partnership successful is that “our family service workers will do a lot to ask open ended questions of our families about what their priorities are and who does what in their family, and they kind of get to know that on their home visits... So, they know their families very well.” Thus, at this basic level, openness seems to be unproblematically good.

However, both refugees and organizational staff disclosed experiencing conflicts surrounding the desirability of openness. Refugees described being unwilling to share certain information with organizational staff because of concerns for their own privacy and concerns that information could be used against them due to stereotypes and prejudices of organizational workers. Simultaneously, some organizational staff struggled with how and when to ask refugees about their lives while not forcing them to relive painful histories unnecessarily and while not subjecting refugees to culturally insensitive communication. Further, though one refugee (Amare, Male, Ethiopia) reported learning some about his case worker’s personal life (e.g. that she was a divorced mother) and some volunteers spoke about sharing their own stories with the refugees they helped,

many on both sides saw the revelation of personal information as uni-directional (from refugee to staff). As a result of these tensions, both sides wondered about the extent to which real dialogue was either valuable or possible in this mediating context.

The tensions surrounding how much and when to disclose, however, occur in part because of a limited understanding of what dialogue is and could be. As Deetz and Simpson (2004) argue, “the everyday conception of dialogue focuses attention on the act of self-expression and the processes by which what one “means” is transferred to others” (p. 142). Under this conception of dialogue, dialogue cannot occur between organizational staff and refugee-clients while simultaneously allowing refugees to protect their privacy because self-expression and dialogue are synonymous. Furthermore, in this understanding of dialogue, which evolves from the conduit (message transfer) metaphor of communication, information shared by refugees to staff or from staff to refugees cannot be (mis)interpreted or misunderstood. Under this definition of dialogue, dialogue cannot be occurring where (mis)interpretation exists. As a result, in this narrow sense of dialogue, dialogue and privacy, openness and closedness do appear to be mutually exclusive tensions.

Thankfully, such a limited understanding of dialogue can be expanded into a more meaningful communication form. In contrast to the popular understanding of dialogue above, Deetz and Simpson (2004) argue that dialogic communication requires the abandonment of a quest for a unitary self and its control. In this sense, real dialogue requires recognizing the multiplicity, complexity and unknowability of the “other” while simultaneously seeking to create a shared understanding with that other person despite



the “otherness of the other” (p. 143). Dialogue is, at its best, an interaction among people that does not require simple and full self-disclosure, but still “produces in its interaction something greater than the sum of its parts and leaves participants changed by that interaction” (Simpson, 2008, p. 139)

This process is certainly not easy. As Lerner and West note, “Dialogue is a form of struggle; it’s not chitchat” (1996, p. 266). But, what this conception of dialogue allows is a recognition that one may never fully reveal oneself to another. Even in a “perfectly open” situation, further exploration would reveal that differences in personal history, biases, values, etc. would prevent two people from perfectly knowing each other. Rather, such a perfect understanding is neither necessary nor desirable for meaningful communication to occur. Thus, this sense of dialogue embraces the both/and of openness and closedness, of self-revelation and privacy.

Theoretically, then, research on mediating refugee resettlement organizations should seek to identify ways in which real, meaningful dialogue can be fostered between organizational staff and refugee-clients by encouraging both sides to share ideas and experiences with each other without expecting either side to relinquish their own privacy. Practically, the refugees I interviewed believed that a stronger sense of dialogue and openness could be achieved if those they worked with in the organization shared their own lives and experiences with refugees. While this might be on face an odd practice for Americans accustomed to the anonymity of bureaucracy, such mutual sharing both promotes openness and invites transformation by those on both sides of the mediating organization in more meaningful ways.

### **Integration and Separation, Uniqueness and Uniformity**

Finally, significant tensions emerged surrounding purposes of communication as a means of creating integration and uniformity and as a way to maintain uniqueness and separation. This tension asks the degree to which the goal of communication with refugees in refugee resettlement programs should be to assimilate refugees into “American” cultural, economic, and civic life (presuming, implausibly, that there is a monolithic American culture into which to assimilate) versus the desirability and practicality of preserving, accommodating and celebrating differences.

Both such goals have historical precedent. For instance, French policy on refugee migration assumes that the goal of resettlement should be the “cultural and political integration of all those within its territories as citizens and the disappearance of minority cultures” (Murard, 1999, p. 30). In the United States, such sentiment plays a defining role in the historical metaphor of America as a “melting pot.” The phrase *the melting pot* comes from Israel Zangwill’s 1908 play of the same name. In it, the protagonist, who has escaped from a pogrom in Russia, gives up his Russian-Jewish roots and happily embraces “Americanism” (Zangwill, 1911). Since then, the phrase ‘melting pot’ has been used to connote an idealized immigration goal of willing cultural assimilation of immigrants to an “American” culture. Yet, in their seminal work *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Glazer and Moynihan (1963) argued that such a metaphor was fundamentally flawed, given cultural diversity of “Americans” and the persistent ethnic, religious and cultural identities of migrants to the United States. They argue that the melting pot simply does

not happen, and as a result, such assimilatory goals are unwise (Glazer & Moynihan, 1970).

In contrast, British Home Secretary Roy Jenkins, argued in 1968 that “integration” of refugees had to be understood “not as a flattening process of uniformity, but cultural diversity, coupled with equal opportunity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance” (Rex, 1996, p. 134). In the United States, such sentiment appears in a wide variety of contemporary metaphors of migration, including “mosaic,” “quilt,” “kaleidoscope” and “salad bowl” (Ellis & Wright, 1998, p. 688). Each of these metaphors emphasizes a unified fabric, design or dish made from individual and distinct colors, textures and/or flavors. In these metaphors, immigrants are expected to preserve their cultural traditions and heritage while becoming part of the American whole.

Thus, as American refugee resettlement organizations seek to mediate the refugee experience of American cultural life, this tension asks, “What should mediation mean?” Does mediation imply a monodirectional process of assimilation or a multidirectional process of mutual change? According to Berger and Neuhaus’ (1977) conceptualization of mediating organizations, mediating organizations should stand “between the individual in his private life and the large institutions of public life”(p. 2). This between-ness serves two functions, both interpreting and transferring public culture to the private individual and ensuring that public structures have personal meaning. As a result, mediating structures are tasked to not only help their participants become active in American cultural and civic life, mediating structures are also supposed to provide participants with an avenue to share their cultural and personal values with the civic realm. In this sense,

mediating structures, as conceptualized by Berger and Neuhaus are to support mosaics or kaleidoscopes rather than melting pot views.

In some ways, this goal of mutual influence / mutual transformation was supported in the accounts of the workers and volunteers in both refugee resettlement organizations I studied. When asked their personal motivations for working with refugees, participants from both Catholic Social Services and Community Action Partnership overwhelmingly responded with some version of the desire to learn more about refugees and their cultures, practices and histories. Yet, when actual policies and practices were described, the refugee resettlement organizations in this study saw their roles primarily as transforming refugees to “American” values on work, welfare, and self-sufficiency (especially emphasizing employment over all else), rather than accepting refugees’ self-constructed definitions of what it might mean to live a meaningful life in the United States (e.g. pursuing education, valuing family over work, etc.). Moreover, as many of the organizational staff in both agencies described as they explicated the tension of empowerment and bureaucracy, that overarching emphasis on self-sufficiency and employment is, at least in part, a product of the Federal laws and guidelines to which these agencies are bound as recipients of US Office of Refugee Resettlement Grants. As a result, the focus on self-sufficiency through immediate employment dominates the refugee resettlement discourse throughout the United States.

Nevertheless, while it would be easy to presume that assimilation is always harmful or that emphasizing a “separate but equal” refugee culture is always best (Mestheneos & Ioannidi, 2002, p. 306), these tensions of integration and separation and

uniqueness and uniformity demonstrate that a more complicated picture emerges. In addition to valuing their own separate cultures and experiences, refugees routinely expressed a desire to integrate into broader American cultural practices and norms, and while some degree of uniqueness was at least rhetorically valued by both of the resettlement agencies, practical limitations due to funding, legal requirements and staff hours required some degree of uniformity among those they served in order to ensure quality care.

Theoretically, then, research on mediating refugee resettlement organizations should seek to identify ways in which the organizations can best manage the conflicting goals of mediating American life “down” to refugees while simultaneously mediating refugee experiences, cultures and values “up” to larger American communities. Conceptualizing the mediating relationship as a truly dialogic one (in which both sides might learn, share and grow) has theoretical merit. Practically, workers and volunteers will continue to need to translate American cultural practices and provide information about basic goods and services as well as expected practices in the United States. However, at the same time, for refugee resettlement organizations to achieve their potential as mediating organizations, they have to take seriously communication moving the opposite way. By establishing refugee discussion groups or other means to garner refugees’ experiential expertise (see earlier discussion), refugee resettlement organizational workers can understand more fully how and to what extent the information they are sharing is meaningful in the lives of those they hope to serve. Furthermore, no one I spoke to in either Catholic Social Services or Community Action Partnership spoke

of holding events designed to help refugees share their cultures/experiences/practices with the larger Lincoln, Nebraskan, and/or American communities. Thus, I argue that these organizations need to respond seriously to Berger and Neuhaus' (1996) call to not only mediate American public life for refugees, but to allow refugees' a stage to share their private voices with the American public.

### **Critique**

This study offers a number of contributions to the literature on communication in mediating organizations, particularly in those engaged in refugee resettlement. One contribution of this dissertation is that it sheds light upon the predominance of the conduit metaphor of communication in mediating organizations and seeks to expand knowledge and expertise in more nuanced ways. Recognizing mediation as a multi-directional process of communicating downwards from staff to refugees and as a process of communication up from refugees to staff and communities will allow organizational communication scholars to develop further the roles of experiential expertise in the success of mediating refugee resettlement organizations specifically, and in client-serving nonprofit organizations more broadly.

This research also furthers the theoretical development of the communicating empowerment literature in organizational communication by challenging the validity of defining empowerment in singular terms of "control" over one's life. Rather than emphasizing 'empowerment' as a broad and singular concept in which an empowered person has "control," theoretical understandings of empowerment must seek to recognize multiple empowerments in different life arenas and from different positionalities which

may function in overlapping and at times competing ways. Further, this study actively questions the role of mediating organizations in empowerment by asking “empowerment according to whom?” Again, experiential expertise and emergent understandings of empowerment must be taken more seriously by communication scholars in the future.

There are limitations to the findings, of course. First, though given the richness of their stories and the difficulty of recruiting refugee participants made eleven interviewees an acceptable number for this study, certainly eleven individuals (primarily from Sudan) cannot and should not represent the experiences of all refugees to migrate to the United States. Similarly, though the two organizations selected for analysis represent the organizations most active in refugee mediation in Lincoln, Nebraska, the experiences of the fifteen organizational staff and workers in these two organizations are not meant to be representative of refugee resettlement organizations nationally. Certainly, geographic, religious, ethnic and cultural contexts vary even in the United States, and communicative experiences in refugee resettlement organizations across the country may vary significantly. Nevertheless, the stories shared reveal important tensions which may resonate in similar organizational settings. This research, then, serves as an important foray into the conversation about communication in refugee resettlement organizations, not as the definitive construction of how that communication can and ought to occur.

Beyond this limitation, I struggled throughout this research to not fall into the instrumental orientation that depicts organizational tensions as “ruptures” or flaws in the “social fabric” of organizations (Putnam, 1986, p. 153). In the simplest of terms, I found myself wanting to “fix” or resolve the communicative tensions which emerged, and I

repeatedly slipped into a mental frame in which tensions equal problems and good research could provide solutions. However, I take seriously the position of Trethewey and Ashcraft (2004) when they challenge this assumption of organizational rationality and argue that paradox, contradiction and irony are normal conditions of organizational life, not anomalous problems to be removed or resolved. Consistent with Trethewey and Ashcraft's call, I consistently struggled to remind myself that "foregrounding tension can lead to richer understandings of actual practice and thereby aid in theory building" (p. 82). As this research continues, I continue to seek ways in which to foreground and value multiple tensions simultaneously, and work to find ways in which those tensions can be embraced and valued in productive and meaningful ways.

### **Conclusion**

The ideas, interpretations and heuristic merit of the current project represent a base for a program of research I intend to explore and evolve over the next few years. Furthermore, the experiences and stories shared with me by volunteers, workers and refugees in mediating resettlement organizations have influenced by scholarly and civic identities. For instance, I am now much more reflective of the impact of mediating "empowerment" programs and I seek to understand more fully the ramifications of communication as a tool of organizing to "empower" those perceived to be lesser in some way. I also hope to continue to develop alternative frames for communication in and from mediating organizations that rely more on voice and experiential expertise and less on the conduit metaphors of communication. I have shared my findings thus far with both organizations that participated in my study, and I intend to continue to use my findings to



make practical applications available and relevant to those organizations seeking to help migrants and refugees settle in the United States. Mediating organizations will continue to play a significant role in American public life, and organizational communication has much to contribute to the meaningful success of these organizations for the clients, staff and communities they serve.

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## APPENDIX A: Refugee Client Interview Guide

*This is a loose interview guide, to the extent that I will allow the participant to lead, asking follow up questions and changing the order of questions as seems appropriate to the conversation.*

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. I am very interested in understanding your experiences resettling in the United States generally, and your experiences of working with \_\_\_\_ (Organization)\_\_\_\_ in particular.

1. Could you begin by telling me a bit about where you're from and how you came to Lincoln?

(Follow ups: ask if comfortable sharing age, nationality (country of origin), length of time in the United States generally and Lincoln specifically...)

2. I'm especially interested in the groups and organizations you might have interacted with since you came to Nebraska. Can you tell me a bit about any organizations that have been particularly influential in your process of resettlement here?
3. I'm particularly interested in your interactions with --- (Organization)----. When did you start interacting with them?
4. Why did you choose to seek services from --- (Organization)---?
5. Where have your encounters with the organizational staff typically been located? In their offices? In your home? Elsewhere?

6. In general, what have you gained (what have been the advantages of?) working with ----Organization----
7. In general, what have been the disadvantages of working with ----Organization----?

I'm specifically interested in the communication you experience in these organizations – this may be communication you receive verbally, out-loud from workers or volunteers in the organization, or nonverbally, in letters, fliers or other information.

8. What types of communication do you receive most often from the people you interact with in ---Organization---? (verbal, nonverbal?) (from whom?)
9. When you do communicate with workers/staff, what is the content of the communication typically about?
10. What has been your *overall* experience of the communication you've received from all of the organizations/groups you've interacted with?
  - a. In what ways has the communication from different refugee resettlement organizations been helpful?
  - b. In what ways has the communication from different refugee resettlement organizations not been helpful to you?
  - c. In what ways is communication with resettlement organizations similar to or different from organizations you communicated with in your home country?
11. Let us talk a bit about \_\_\_\_ (Organization)\_\_\_\_ in particular.

- a. What has generally been your experience communicating with workers or volunteers from (organization)---

- b. Can you think of an example of a time when you had a positive communication experience with a worker or volunteer from (organization)?

(For positive experiences, ask how the refugee responded. Was that response helpful?)

- c. Can you think of an example of a time when you had a negative communication experience with a worker or volunteer from (organization)?

(For negative experiences, ask how the refugee responded. Was that response helpful?)

- d. Are there any particular volunteers or staff members whose communication has been especially helpful to you? What do they do that is especially helpful?

- e. Are there any particular volunteers or staff members whose communication has been especially unhelpful to you? What do they do that was especially unhelpful?

- f. How did you respond to the ---- (non-helpful communication)----? Did that response improve the situation? (Why or why not?)

- g. Have there been times when you wished you had received more communication from the organization? What were those times?

- h. Have there been times when you wished you had received less communication from the organization? What were those times?
  
- i. What has been your experience communicating with other refugee-participants in (organization)? (ask for stories or examples of positive and negative experiences).
  
- j. Is there anything you would change about the communication in this organization?

**\*\*All of these letters may be repeated multiple times to solicit a variety of examples of communicative interactions\*\***

12. Is there any advice that you would give any of the organizations you've interacted with to help make their communication with other refugees more successful?

13. Is there any other general advice that you would give any of the organizations you've interacted with to help make other refugees' experience better?

Thank you so much for agreeing to speak with me today. (Ask about future contact and recruiting other refugee participants)



## APPENDIX B: Worker/Volunteer Interview Guide

*This is a loose interview guide, to the extent that I will allow the participant to lead, asking follow up questions and changing the order of questions as seems appropriate to the conversation.*

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. I am very interested in understanding your experiences of working/volunteering in a organization that assists refugees as they resettle in the United States.

1. Could you begin by telling me a bit about how you decided to start working with/at ---Organization----

(When did you start working here/for how long have you worked here? What made you decide to work with this organization? Have you worked with/for other organizations that help refugees resettle either in Lincoln or in other communities? – If they have worked for other organizations, why did they leave?)

(Follow ups: ask if comfortable sharing age, nationality (country of origin), and, if applicable, length of time in the United States generally and Lincoln specifically...)

2. In general, what has been your experience of working for ---Organization----
3. Overall, what have you enjoyed about working for/ with ----Organization----? (try to solicit specific examples/stories)
4. Overall, what have you not enjoyed (found frustrating about?) working with/for --Organization----? (try to solicit specific examples/stories)

I'm specifically interested in the communication you experience as you interact with the refugee clients of your organization – this may be communication you receive verbally, out-loud from workers or volunteers in the organization, or nonverbally, in letters, fliers or other information.

5. When you communicate with refugee clients of your organization, what means of communication do you most frequently use? (e.g. verbal, nonverbal?)
6. When you communicate with refugee clients of your organization, where do you typically communicate with them? (The office, their home, etc).
7. When you communicate with refugee clients of your organization, who do you most frequently communicate with? (e.g. all family members, only the “father” or “mother,” etc.)
8. When you communicate with refugee clients of your organization, what is the content of the communication typically about?
9. What has been your overall experience of the communicating with the refugee clients of your organization?
  - a. To what extent has the communication been helpful/productive? In what ways?
  - b. In what ways has that communication been unhelpful/unproductive? In what ways?
10. Let us talk a bit more about particular examples.
  - c. Can you think of an example of a time when you had a positive communication experience with a particular refugee client?

(For positive experiences, ask how the worker responded to the refugee client. How did that response affect the relationship?)
  - d. Can you think of an example of a time when you had a negative communication experience with a particular refugee client?

(For negative experiences, ask how the worker responded. Was that response helpful?)

- e. Are there any particular refugee clients who you have generally found it easier to interact with? What do they do that is especially helpful?
- f. Are there any particular refugee clients who you have generally found it more difficult to interact with? What do they do that was especially unhelpful?
- g. How did you respond to the ---- (non-helpful communication)----? Did that response improve the situation? (Why or why not?)
- h. Have there been times when you wished you had received more communication from your refugee clients? What were those times?
- i. Have there been times when you wished you had received less communication from your refugee clients? What were those times?
- j. What has been your experience communicating with other workers/volunteers in your organization? (ask for stories or examples of positive and negative experiences).
- k. Is there anything you would change about the communication in this organization?

\*\*All of these letters may be repeated multiple times to solicit a variety of examples of communicative interactions\*\*

11. What has been your greatest challenge in working with clients in your organization?

12. Is there any advice that you would give your organization to help make their communication with other refugees more successful?

13. Is there any other general advice that you would give your organization to help make other refugees' experience better?

14. Is there any advice you would give your organization to make your experience of working/volunteering there a more enjoyable experience overall?

Thank you so much for agreeing to speak with me today.  
(Ask about future contact and recruiting other worker/volunteer participants)

### **APPENDIX C: General Observation Protocol**

This protocol might be used to guide the observation of a meeting or other communication interaction at one of my organizations. These categories are very general, in that they are meant to guide my basic observations. Obviously, additional notes will be taken as I note things of interest in my observation.

I am hoping to observe various types of settings in these resettlement organizations, including staff meetings, training programs, informal discussions, etc.

#### **BACKGROUND**

1. At which organization is this observation taking place?
2. What is being observed? (e.g. regular staff meeting, informal discussion, etc)
3. Who is involved in this observation (e.g. people present at meeting, etc).
4. What is the larger context of this meeting/encounter? (e.g. Was the meeting called for some reason? Is it regularly scheduled? For what purpose?)
5. Date: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Number of participants: \_\_\_\_\_
7. Length of the session: \_\_\_\_\_
8. Location of the session: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **OBSERVATIONS**

1. In general, what issues/ideas are being discussed in this situation?

2. How are refugee-clients being described, if at all?
3. How is internal organizational communication (between workers or workers/volunteers) being described, if at all?
4. How is external communication (between workers/refugees) being described, if at all?
5. If communication between refugees & workers is occurring, what is the purpose of the exchange?
  - a. What is the tone?
  - b. To what extent do both parties appear to be meeting their goals?
  - c. Other characteristics of the exchange?
6. What is the overall climate/tone of this meeting/encounter?